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CINEMA

YOUNG @ HEART

BY STEPHEN WALKER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Get ready to rock with the most entertaining golden oldies you will ever meet in the senior citizen's chorus Young@Heart. With a show only weeks away, they must learn a slate of new songs ranging from James Brown to Coldplay. The chorus's director leads them through tough rehearsals, proving that rock and roll can be hard work—especially if you're hard of hearing! Climaxing in a triumphant performance, their inspiring story celebrates the unbreakable bonds of friendship and the life-affirming power of music.



WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/YOUNG-AT-HEART



FROM THE FILMMAKER

I first came across this extraordinary bunch of seniors back in 2005 when they were on tour, performing live in a theatre near my home in London. My wife bought tickets on the strength of some terrific reviews in the British press, but I have to say I was—to say the least—a little skeptical. A chorus of senior citizens singing rock music? Was this going to be some sort of gimmick? A bit patronizing perhaps? I wasn't sure, but I went anyway, ready to walk out at a moment's notice.

Then something amazing happened. Eileen Hall, a British-born, 93-year-old, stepped up to the mike and belted out the lyrics to "Should I Stay Or Should I Go?" by the The Clash. Everybody in the packed audience gasped, and not simply because it was totally unexpected. As Eileen continued, the song took on a whole new meaning. She was singing, not about relationships, but about life and death. It was profoundly moving—as well as exciting and fresh. I was hooked. Here was the key to a film I just knew I had to make.

I'd always wanted to make something about old age; seniors get such a raw deal in the media—not to mention in real life—too often. Nobody wants to be reminded about getting old. But in this chorus, I could see a possible way through the tunnel: to create a sort of "rock opera" about old age, a film that would address the big issues of aging, but through music audiences could connect with and really enjoy. And the personalities in the chorus were so wonderfully engaging: often hilariously funny, larger-than-life and sometimes

shockingly honest about their lives—even, as you'll see, their sex lives! I felt these were people audiences could love and recognize. People who reminded us of loved ones we know—or knew—in our own lives.

And so began a six month journey of discovery. After persuading the chorus's charismatic director Bob Cilman to take us on board (in itself no easy feat!) we started production in the chorus's hometown of Northampton, Massachusetts, as they prepared for a new show. I got to spend time with every member, consuming vast quantities of cake and cookies in the process (for some reason everybody seemed to think I needed feeding up). We decided to have lots of fun with the music, even creating our own music videos, which would point up the often-grotesque stereotypes of old age. There are four of them in the film, but I suppose my favorite is the Chorus's version of "I Wanna Be Sedated" by The Ramones, which we set in a real nursing home. It was truly a protest song, which made the original punk version look rather tame. The staff and residents had never seen anything like it!

My journey encompassed pretty well every human emotion I had ever experienced. There was fun, laughter and there was pathos and tragedy. Above all, there was the sense that these people offered a view of life which was exhilarating. Here they were, in the twilight of their own lives, living to the full, seizing the moment for everything it was worth—and not letting go. As a philosophy of life I found it utterly inspiring. I sincerely hope you do too.

Stephen Walker



THE FILM

YOUNG@HEART is about both a chorus and a state of mind. As a chorus, it is like no other. Some two-dozen strong, this group of seventy-, eighty- and even ninety-somethings belt out songs by rock groups and punk artists, such as the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Sonic Youth and Talking Heads. And they obviously have a great time doing it.

Under the direction of Bob Cilman, who founded the group in 1982, Young@Heart has become a phenomenon not only in their home town of Northampton, Massachusetts, but also in Europe, where they have given over a dozen concerts. When the chorus was first formed as an informal singing group at the Walter Salvo House, the musical selections tended to be traditional— mostly show tunes and old-time popular songs. But over time, Cilman has taken the group in new directions. The musical preferences of the chorus members continue to be classical, opera, and Broadway songs of the '40s, '50s and '60s, but they are an adventurous and open-minded group when it comes to learning and performing contemporary rock.

The film follows Young@Heart during a seven-week period in 2006 as they prepare for their "Alive and Well" concert in Northampton. For this performance, Cilman has chosen a combined program of punk, rock, rhythm & blues and a quiet ballad. Rehearsals are a bit fraught as the singers try to learn lyrics that don't make sense (Sonic Youth's "Schizophrenia"), grasp rhythms that are somewhat challenging (James Brown's "I Feel Good"), and try not to trip over their own tongues (Allen Toussaint's "Yes We Can Can").

Between rehearsals the filmmaker visits several members of the chorus at home. They talk about health issues and near-death experiences, and unanimously express their enthusiasm and love of singing with Young@Heart. As the performance date gets closer, two of the featured singers experience serious medical problems. Bob Salvini, who nearly died of spinal meningitis several years previously, dies of heart failure less than two weeks before the show. Joe Benoit, who has survived six bouts of chemotherapy, finally succumbs to cancer just four days before the performance. Ironically, it is Joe, looking full of vitality, who is the central figure in the "Alive and Well" publicity poster.

Despite these losses, the chorus presses on, fulfilling their engagement at a local prison on the same morning that they learn of Bob Salvini's death. At the concert itself, Fred Knittle sings the Coldplay song, "I Will Fix You," which he was supposed to sing with Bob. The attitude of chorus members is to go on with the show, because that's what Bob or Joe, or any of them, would want.

The film's presentation of the realities of aging is punctuated by the chorus's music videos poking fun at the condition of being old ("I Wanna Be Sedated"), or thumbing their noses at mortality ("Road to Nowhere" and "Stayin' Alive"). But above all, the film celebrates the importance of enjoying life, as Young@Heart so joyously affirms in "Golden Years." After all their hard work preparing for the "Alive and Well" concert—which turns out to be a great success—Young@Heart seems ready to go on for a good long time.



INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN YOUNG@HEART

Bob Cilman – Director, Young @ Heart Chorus; Executive Director, Northampton (MA) Arts Council

Featured chorus members

Eileen Hall, age 92 (deceased)

Joe Benoit, age 83 (deceased)

Lenny Fontaine, age 86

Stan Goldman, age 76

Dora Morrow, age 84

Fred Nittle (deceased)

Bob Salvini (deceased)

Steve Martin, age 79

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

How it All Began

In 1982, Bob Cilman was working as the site coordinator at the dining facility at the Walter Salvo House, a living facility for the elderly in Northampton, Massachusetts. One day he was approached by pianist, Judith Sharpe to organize a sing-a-long. He took her up on the idea, posted a notice and twenty-five people showed up. As they sang and told jokes, Bob began to see the possibilities of developing a more formal performance group. Soon the Young@Heart Chorus was born. Bob enlisted the help of Roy Faudree, artistic director of the experimental theater company, No Theater in Northampton, and in 1983 they staged their first show, Stompin' at the Salvo. The group's early shows sold out, bringing them lots of publicity and attracting many new members. The chorus collaborated with a variety of community groups, including Latino breakdancers from a local housing project, Cambodian folk artists, punk rockers, and a gay men's chorus.

With Roy Faudree again serving as the catalyst, Young@Heart began touring internationally in the late 1990s. Roy helped arrange for the chorus to participate in Rotterdam's annual R Festival, where the response to its show Road to Heaven was phenomenal. This led to over a dozen more European tours and a specially commissioned work, Road to Nowhere.

The chorus continues to be made up of a mix of members with professional performing experience, amateurs, and individuals whose first time on stage is with Young@Heart. The only requirements for joining are the ability to sing, a commitment to attend rehearsals regularly and a definite "young at heart" attitude.

Singing: Good for Your Health

A combination of scientific evidence and self-reports by singers points to a wealth of physical, psychological and emotional benefits that result

from lifting your voice in song. When Bob Salvini sang his way through a bout of spinal meningitis, as described in the film, he may only have been trying to cure himself. Here's what singing has been found to do for both body and mind:

- Lower heart rate, decrease blood pressure, reduce stress
- Produce higher levels of immunoglobulin A and cortisol, chemical indicators of enhanced immunity
- Help people cope with chronic pain
- Provide a social bond
- For seniors involved in choral singing – fewer doctor visits, fewer eyesight problems, less depression, less need for medication, fewer falls
- For Alzheimer's patients – beneficial effects on cognitive powers, physical ability and emotions. The part of the brain that processes speech is different than the one that processes music, and music helps patients remember and sing the words.
- Seniors who sing report feeling better generally; improvement in the quality of their speaking voices; easier breathing; better posture
- Other choral singers report high energy, improved lung capacity, and enhanced feelings of relaxation, mood and confidence.

Separating the Myths From the Facts

If you ask people to describe the typical older adult (age 65+), you might hear terms such as senile, slow, arthritic, fragile, sickly and set in their ways. There are many misconceptions about older adults, possibly including the latest—that 60 is the new 50. Because older people comprise a very diverse age group, they are not all alike. The lists below can help debunk some of the common stereotypes of older adults

False

- ***The majority of people over 65 are senile or have serious cognitive impairment.*** Only about 10 percent of older adults have irreversible organic brain deterioration.
- ***People lose interest in sex as they age.*** There is no particular age at which sexual feelings or interest declines. Most older people can lead an active and satisfying sex life.
- ***As physical changes occur in the body, people also become more difficult and rigid.*** Older people usually exhibit the same characteristics as they did in middle age or earlier; personality remains relatively consistent throughout the lifespan.
- ***You can't teach an old dog new tricks.*** Older people usually take longer to learn something new, but research shows that they can learn new skills and improve old ones.

True

- ***Older people take more medications than younger people.*** While illness is not an automatic part of growing old, a majority of people over 65 have at least one chronic ailment that calls for medication.
- ***All five senses tend to decline in old age, as does physical***



strength. Nevertheless, most older people are strong enough to exercise moderately, and with regular hearing and vision tests they can prevent falls and other accidents.

- **Older persons who are unable to care for themselves are usually cared for by a relative.** In general, even the majority who don't need care and live independently maintain close contact with their families.
- **The most common painful condition found in older adults is osteoarthritis.** It is important that the condition be evaluated properly, as it can hide a depressive disorder; the perception of pain can also be associated with boredom, loneliness, and bereavement.

Sources: <http://www.ipasite.com/MythsofAging.html>; http://www.ehow.com/how_2127832_debunk-myths-old-age.html#; <http://www.apa.org/pi/aging/practitioners/myths.html>; and <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/OC/freepubs/pdf/CF-14.pdf>

A Picture of the Older Adult Population

A sampling of the most recent available data (from 2007) provides this profile of the population of Americans aged 65 or older:

- Numbers:** 37.9 million, representing 12.6% of the U.S. population or more than one in every eight Americans
 - Sex ratio:** 21.9 million women, 16 million men, or 137 women for every 100 men
 - Life expectancy at age 65:** average of an additional 19 years—20.3 years for women, 17.4 years for men
 - Centenarians:** 80,771 persons aged 100 or more, a 117% increase from the 1990 census figure of 37,306
 - Growth projections:** the 65+ age group will increase from 35 million in 2000 to 40 million in 2010, and to 55 million in 2020
 - Living arrangements:** approximately 30% (10.9 million) of noninstitutionalized older persons live alone (7.9 million women, 2.9 million men). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, slightly over 5 percent of the 65+ population occupy nursing homes and other assisted living facilities. The rate of nursing home use increases with age from 1.4 percent of the young-old to 24.5 percent of the oldest-old. Almost 50 percent of those 95 and older live in nursing homes.
 - Median income*:** \$24,323 for men, \$14,021 for women; for households with families headed by persons aged 65 or more, median income is \$41,851.
- *(That is, half of the group have income above the amount and half have income below the amount.)

Sources: The Administration on Aging, www.aoa.gov and <http://missourifamilies.org>

It's Never Too Late

Many well-known people began their major endeavors in later life, and others have done things they considered important or enjoyable, undeterred by advanced age. Here are a few examples:

- Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the *Little House on the Prairie* books in her 60s.
- Mohandas K. Gandhi, at age 61, led the famous 200-mile Salt March to Dando to protest the salt tax imposed by the British on the people of India.
- Anna Mary Robertson Moses (Grandma Moses) began her quarter-century long painting career at age 76.
- Peter Mark Roget started working on his Thesaurus at age 70, and oversaw every update until his death at age 90.
- Doris Haddock, aka Granny D, at age 89 walked from Los Angeles to Washington, DC to raise awareness for the issue of campaign finance reform.
- George H.W. Bush marked his 75th, 80th and 85th birthdays by skydiving.
- Colonel Sanders started his KFC business in his 60s.
- Henry Roth wrote his highly-acclaimed book, *Call It Sleep*, at age 28, then stopped writing until his 70s, when he wrote the sequel.
- Harry Bernstein published his first novel, *The Dream*, at age 96.

TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO YOUNG@HEART

A screening of YOUNG@HEART can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- gerontology
- music education
- choral singing
- elder care
- arts participation & administration
- psychology of aging
- lifelong learning
- social services for older adults

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What was your initial reaction to seeing and hearing the performances by these singers? Did that change during the course of the film? If so, why do you think your reaction changed?
2. What was the most touching moment for you in the film? Why was that so touching?
3. What do you think of Bob Cilman's song selections for the chorus? Do you think the songs use the chorus members' age to maximum effect? If so, in what way?
4. Punk and rock lyrics are often difficult to understand. What effect does it have on the listener to hear the words of these songs sung clearly by Young @ Heart?
5. How did it make you feel when chorus members discussed death or dying? Do you think your reaction is typical of most people's? How is the topic of death generally treated in our society?
6. Young@Heart has performed extensively in Europe but not that much in the U.S. How do you think the chorus would be received by American audiences? Is there a difference in attitudes toward older people in Europe versus the U.S.?
7. Did this film either confirm or dispel any stereotypes you have about older people? Explain your answer.
8. Why do certain stereotypes of older people exist? Where do these stereotypes come from in our society?
9. Are there lessons that you take away from this film? If so, what are they?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- 1 – Volunteer your services in a facility or a program for older adults. Consult local nonprofits, government social services agencies or religious organizations to learn where the greatest needs for volunteers are.
- 2 – Organize an “opportunity fair” in your community, with special emphasis on attracting older adults. They have much to offer and, especially if they are retired, many would welcome the opportunity to put their lifetime of skills and experience to work helping others. Depending on the needs and interests of your community, you might want to focus your efforts on connecting older adult volunteers with school projects.
- 3 - If you are an older person, volunteering can give you a chance to try out new things or to use your skills in a new setting. For some ideas, check the AARP web site at www.aarp.org/makeadifference/volunteer.
- 4 – Record stories of older members of your family or residents of your neighborhood. You can do this informally with your own tape recorder or more formally, through an organization such as Story Corps (www.storycorps.org) or the National Visionary Leadership Project (www.visionaryproject.com).
- 5 – Create a tribute to an older adult you know who is “young at heart.” Visit the Fox Searchlight web site (www.foxsearchlight.com/youngatheart) for ideas and suggestions for starting a tribute web site where you can post videos and stories about your special person.

6 – Start an intergenerational singing group. Participants don’t need great voices, just an enjoyment of singing with others. Inquire among your friends and acquaintances for a pianist or keyboardist who can help select songs and provide the accompaniment. Schedule a regular singing date and keep the door open to new members.

7 – If you belong to a chorus or singing group, arrange to sing regularly at a local hospital, nursing home or other care facility. You need not limit your performances to audiences of seniors—consider facilities that cater to other age groups, such as children or teens. Bring song sheets so part of the program can be a sing-along.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.communitycinema.org, the web site of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the web site of your PBS station.

RESOURCES

Young@Heart Chorus

<http://www.youngatheartchorus.com> – The official web site of the Young@Heart Chorus contains brief biographies of the members along with information on their shows and tours.

<http://www.foxsearchlight.com/youngatheart> – The official web site of the film contains videos and vignettes, news and reviews of the Young@Heart Chorus.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2000/oct/22/features_review27 – This October 2000 article from The Observer is a colorful description of the humor and the grim realities associated with a chorus of elderly performers.

Benefits of Singing

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97320958> – This essay from NPR’s “This I Believe” series is by British rock composer Brian Eno and contains a list of songs for group singing.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/26/healthandwell-being.fitness> – “Keeping Body and Soul in Tune” describes some of the research showing the health benefits of singing.

Advocacy and Services

<http://www.ncoa.org> – The National Council on Aging is a non-profit service and advocacy organization that serves as a national voice for older adults and workd to improve the lives of older Americans.

<http://www.aoa.gov> – The Administration on Aging, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services helps elderly individuals maintain their independence in their homes and communities through comprehensive, coordinated, and cost effective systems of long-term care, and livable communities across the U.S. The web site contains statistics on the aging population and information on programs for older Americans.

<http://www.aarp.org> – This national association offers information on a wide range of interest areas and services for older Americans.

Healthy Aging

<http://www.cdc.gov/aging> – Healthy Aging for Older Adults, comprehensive health information from the the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<http://www.alz.org> – The Alzheimer’s Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

<http://www.webmd.com/healthy-aging/default.htm> – WebMD Healthy Aging Health Center contains a wide variety of news and information on health-related topics.



<http://www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow> – The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging (FHA) aims to build a bridge between the research and practice of geriatrics health care professionals and the public, and to advocate on behalf of older adults and their special needs. The web site offers help with making health care decisions and how to talk with your doctor.

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov> – With navigation and other features specially designed for use by older adults, NIHSeniorHealth features health and wellness information for older adults from the National Institutes of Health.

Ageism, Stereotypes, Facts

<http://www.cnpea.ca/ageism.htm> – This Canadian site provides a definition and examples ageism along with ways to counter it.

<http://www.ipasite.com/MythsofAging.html> – This site belonging to a clinical practice in the San Francisco area contains a topic area on the myths of aging.

<http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/OC/freepubs/pdf/CF-14.pdf> – “Myths and Facts About Aging”, a 2-page document from the University of Hawaii, contains a quiz and facts about aging.

http://www.ehow.com/how_2127832_debunk-myths-old-age.html# - One of a number of “how to” sites, this one provides some guidance on debunking the myths about old age.

<http://www.apa.org/pi/aging/practitioners/myths.html> – American Psychological Association web site with comprehensive information on the aging process

<http://www.apa.org/pi/aging/practitioners/executive.html> – “What Practitioners Should Know About Working with Older Adults”, an online publication of the American Psychological Association, contains comprehensive information on the realities of the aging process, with information presented in short, one- or two-page sections.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema.

