

# Musical memories light the corners of the mind

Music journalist cueing up to speak at Seniors' Month celebration

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No matter whether you're a trained opera singer or can't carry a tune, music should be part of your life.

"Music is one those things that takes very little energy and gives back so much," said music journalist Kerry Martin. "You can be moved to tears by a certain piece of music."

"Just the fact that music can transport us to an emotion and particular time in our lives means it's important to make a list of songs that are important to you," said Martin, who will be the keynote speaker at the 7th annual Seniors' Month and Age Well Celebration. "I have very weird songs that have meant a lot to me; it's subjective, but it's a way to bring them back."

Different types of music affect people in completely different ways, he said. "What I mean by this is that a classical piece can have the affect on one person that a metal song may have on another. It completely comes down to a specific taste."

"Take the Mozart effect, for example, and the thesis that classical music not only helps lock you into your studying groove, but can also improve cognitive function from an early age. The arguments for classical music are strong, but that is not to say that others can't use music like modern electro, or even smooth jazz, to get to that same place. Some studies say that the best beats-per-minute actually shifts according to what you are doing."

One of Martin's grandmothers passed away a few months ago. "On some days she'd be sharper than on others, but she loved Elvis Presley so much," he said. "She'd sing along and dance along when my mother played Elvis music. For my mom, it made my grandmother's last year so much better, because she had the music close by. It comforts the people around you, as well."

At a certain point, it's more about the act of being part of the musical experience than about singing the perfect song, he said.

"There can be a song where you have to sing a note, and nobody has it right, but it's about the expression. There are several types of mindsets when playing music; one is striving for perfection, and another is to simply enjoy it. You set the bar where you want. It's about the enjoyment of it and making sure you're doing something to communicate with that area of your brain, firing off signals to set up a chain reaction."

The seed for his own realization of the power of music was planted years ago when his other grandmother was in full-stage dementia. "Though she couldn't remember a lot of her surroundings and who she was, she remembered the words to the hymns she had



Music journalist Kerry Martin at Sonic Boom in Toronto. Martin, keynote speaker at the June 8 Seniors' Month celebration, says that music can transport us back to an emotion and a particular time in our lives. KRISTEN GILL

grown up with. Up until she was in a long-term care home, she went to church every day to experience those hymns."

Martin's mother was the recreational therapist at the long-term care bungalow in Newfoundland where his grandmother lived, and his mother made sure music was regularly provided, in the form of touring musicians, church music and guest singers.

"Music awakens parts of the brain," Martin said. "There are

studies that say up to the last stage of dementia you can access things that you commit to memory early on, like riding a bike, playing a piano or singing a song."

A music journalist for almost a decade now, his interest piqued on the topic thanks to a documentary called *Alive Inside* from 2014, and *This is Your Brain on Music*, published in 2007 by writer and musicologist Daniel J. Levitin.

"I have seen first-hand cases of near-unresponsive dementia or

Alzheimer's patients start to sing old hymns, or get up and start dancing," he said. "Though they may dance out-of-time, you know that the part of their brain dedicated to storing inner syncopation is very much alive. This is called the implicit memory bank."

Author Levitin talks to the "why" in all of this, said Martin. "It makes sense why certain memories get locked away. Hearing a specific song can take you to another time as well."

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Born and raised in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, Martin was a music columnist for CBC Radio One Toronto for two years, and hosted a five-part series for CBC Radio One Canada in August 2017 on music, and how it moves us both emotionally and physically.

He was also a producer for CBC Music where he worked on the Tragically Hip's final Kingston concert, as well as radio content for the band on shows such as CBC Radio 2's Drive, CBC Radio 2 Morning, CBC's q, and many others.

He is currently a music content specialist and a Canadian music editor with several streaming services.

At the Seniors' Month and Age Well Celebration event in Ottawa there will a lot of music, "old music, new music and stories about music."

"I hope that anybody at any level can get something from it," he said. "The most important thing is that whether you realize it or not, you may know more about music than you think. You have thousands of songs. Look at yourself first, and then look at the music. If you had a big year in 1978, you have songs that take revisiting. What's more fun than doing that?"

The Seniors' Month and Age Well Celebration takes place Friday, June 8, 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Nepean Sportsplex, 1301 Woodroffe Ave. Admission and parking are free. For information, view [www.agewellsolutions.ca](http://www.agewellsolutions.ca).

For information on Kerry Martin, view [www.ohhikerry.com](http://www.ohhikerry.com).

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