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Sundance Review: 'Alive Inside' Sings of Music and Memory

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2014

Alive Inside is a pitch-perfect documentary that brilliantly explores the transformational effects of music on elders with Alzheimer's and dementia. A savvy distributor should snap this one up; despite its apparent marketing challenges, the film is emotional, uplifting, hopeful, and action-oriented. Properly handled, it should have a decent theatrical run and good VOD audiences. DVD sales for institutional audiences will also be viable.

Director Michael Rossato-Bennett followed social worker Dan Cohen for three years, for what began as an experiment and became a crusade. Cohen, volunteering to work in a nursing home, discovered that by giving the residents iPods and allowing them to experience the music of their past, their symptoms reduced and even seemed to vanish at times. The extraordinary transformations as 90-year-olds put on headphones and suddenly light up with spirit, moving with joy in ways that seemed impossible just moments before, are among the most emotional in the film.

Unlike many other documentaries crafted today, *Alive Inside* does not rely on recreations or manipulative tricks. Instead it makes use of the most powerful cinematic presence of all—the human face, in all its complex and unexpected reactions to the world that surrounds us.

The film's third act broadens out to a critique of America's elder health care system, and then, in its final ten minutes, does what other "social impact" docs fail to do: it sets forth a demonstrable path for change driven by social media.

It's impossible not to take this film personally. At the Sundance press and industry screening, which is a notoriously hardened audience, many people had tears rolling down their cheeks as the film touched at the private experiences of memory loss and personality changes in older family members.

Rossato-Bennett's off-camera narration is eloquent and spare. Cinematography is well-handled, turning rest homes—the least photogenic of places—into locations of power and drama.

Visit the film's website [here](#).

Image from the film, courtesy Sundance Institute.

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