

Tribute

A tribute to Oliver Sacks

9 July 1933 – 30 August 2015

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Editorial note: This manuscript is an expansion of a tribute first published in *Medscape*¹; material is used here with permission.

“Every sickness is a musical problem; Every cure a musical solution” Novalis. Welcome, Ollie.

This hand-written note, on a torn piece of loose leaf paper, was sent to me via interoffice mail, thirty-five years ago, in March of 1980. “Ollie” I learned was the attending neurologist, Oliver Sacks. It was my first week at Beth Abraham Hospital, home to his *Awakenings*² patients, and my new job as the



Photo 1: Concetta Tomaino, Oliver Sacks and Dustin Hoffman (Music Has Power™ Awards, New York, 2006)

¹ To access the manuscript on Medscape, click on the link: www.medscape.com/viewarticle/842267

² *Awakenings* (publication date: 1973, revised edition 1990): the classic account of survivors of the encephalitic lethargica and their return to the world after decades of ‘sleep’. This book was the inspiration for the 1990 film starring Robert De Niro and Robin Williams as Dr. Sacks.

music therapist. I had spent the two previous years at a skilled nursing facility in East New York where I had seen the dramatic impact music had on residents with end stage dementia. These residents, I was told, “had no brains left”. However when I sang and played music for them they could recognise familiar songs and recall lyrics. No-one at the facility could understand my excitement of the prospect that music could reach those with dementia. So you could imagine my delight when I received that strange torn note. The staff neurologist seemed to understand the role of music in medicine. I was eager to find out who “Ollie” was. It would be a few weeks before I met him in person.

I was assigned to the units where those awoken with L-dopa still resided. Most were in wheelchairs, totally dependent in their daily care yet still could sing with full voice and lose their hyperkinetic movement when engaged in drumming or moving to music. In their charts I would find a neurology note and request to “the music therapist” to describe “how was she in music”, “can she replicate a rhythmic pattern”, “does she initiate movement”. I began to look at my clinical work more closely – what in the music allowed these responses to occur? One day I saw one of my patients who was nonverbal, physically rigid, and with severe dementia waiting in line for her neurology evaluation. I stood there until the neurologist appeared.

- “Dr. Sacks, this is my patient, would you like to see how she responds to music?”

- “Oh, yes, do bring her in” he replied enthusiastically.

Thus began our first session together. I observed as this somewhat quiet and socially awkward physician sat face-to-face with the patient, gently holding both her hands and softly singing “Daisy, Daisy la,la,la, la la la”. She opened her eyes, moved her hands in his and smiled. I told him I used a different song – *When the Saints Go Marching In*. He asked me to sit with her and sing it. I too sat face-to-face, held her hands and started to sing “oh when the Saints” – to which she immediately chimed in “go marching in”. He was amazed and delighted.

For the months that followed I had more opportunities to meet him and share questions about music and neurology. I soon learned he lived near me in Bronx. He invited me to his new home on City Island where he shared the personally written journals of the awakenings patients. These journals were filled with personal accounts of each of my patients during the period when they were able to move around and interact freely with others. It also contained the not so nice accounts of what it was like to be spoon-fed and treated like a child. It opened my eyes to the inner worlds and minds of our patients.

He gave me a copy of his book *Awakenings* (Sacks 1976) which was out of print at the time. Throughout the book, Oliver cites examples of his patients’ new mobility as “remusiking” – that the flow of movement was restored with music. The music provided an order, a temporal patterning that allowed for action where inaction had been the norm. We began to discuss what it was about music that could reach our patients so quickly and deeply. For each question I had, Oliver pulled a book from his collection of first editions, Henry Head, Hughlings Jackson, Darwin and introduced me to the founding fathers of neurology and evolutionary science. He gave me copies of A. R. Luria’s book, *The Man with a Shattered World* (Luria 1972) as my introduction to how a damaged mind has to reconstruct the world to be engaged with it. I shared information about the field of music therapy, of the potential for treating people with music.

We were excited by the prospect that music was able to change and improve our patients’ brain function in ways not yet understood. The concept of neuroplasticity was very new.

In the mid ‘80s we met with several scientists to see if they could help us study music and the brain but they laughed and said music was too complex and the science of the brain still too new. The concept of music, especially rhythm, to restore

action was highlighted in Oliver’s *A Leg to Stand On* (Sacks 1984) which chronicled his own recovery from a leg injury.



Photo 2: Lesley Stahl, Oliver Sacks, Concetta Tomaino, Petr Janata and Stanley Jordan (World Science Festival)

In the late ‘80s I became president of the American Association for Music Therapy and invited Oliver to speak at our national conference in Boston as well as the North American Music Therapy conference in Toronto. In 1991 Oliver was invited to give testimony at the Senate Hearing on the revision of the Older American’s Act. This landmark hearing further introduced Oliver to the music therapy community as well as drew public attention to the importance of access to music therapy for those aging in institutions as well as those elders living well in their communities. The hearing had followed the release of the Oscar-nominated film *Awakenings* based on Oliver’s book of the same name. Several scenes in the movie illustrated the power of music to awaken the patients into active engagement and movement.

In 1993, I organised a symposium on Clinical Applications of Music in Neurologic Rehabilitation and Oliver gave the keynote “Music and the Brain”. With the success of the symposium our hospitals’ board of directors gave us support to create the *Institute for Music and Neurologic Function* (New York, USA, <http://musictherapy.imnf.org>) whose mission is to scientifically explore music and the brain in order to develop more effective music therapy treatments to awaken, stimulate and heal through the extraordinary power of music. Oliver has been an advisor since its inception and I the executive director. That same year I submitted a grant request to the New York State Department of Health to research, along with Dr. Sacks, the impact of familiar music on memory function in those with dementia.

His writings have continued to highlight the important role of music in the lives of those with a variety of neurologic conditions. *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1985); *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995); and his book fully devoted to music and the human experience, *Musicophilia* (2007). In addition, his numerous lectures, interviews and letters have contributed greatly to our growing understanding of the power of music to awaken and heal.

It is impossible for me to describe the impact his mentoring and friendship has had on my work and my life over all these years. I am eternally grateful for this amazingly brilliant, generous and caring man who has taught me so much about the mind but most importantly of the humanity and individual spirit of the patients we care for.

Suggested citation:

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SUGGESTED LINKS & VIDEOS

- ❑ Quotes by Oliver Sacks on the power of music:
<http://mic.com/articles/111150/11-beautiful-oliver-sacks-quotes-that-capture-the-power-of-music#.5udHkwrDj>
- ❑ Forever Young: 1991 Senate hearings for the Older American's Act – Oliver Sacks Testimony:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53gsB81Z6qc>
- ❑ Oliver Sacks' acceptance speech at the 2006 Music Has Power™ Awards:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF4PwtU7y3I>
- ❑ Dustin Hoffman presents Music Has Power Award to Dr Sacks:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtHyj3BXgM0>
- ❑ "Partnerships in Care: Uses of Music Therapy in Medical Settings"; video of Sacks and Tomaino at work included in the video from AMTA:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVEhwmq_jF4

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