

Young@Heart: Not going gentle ...

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Stephen Walker

A 20-year study published in 2002 acknowledged that the media and marketing industries play a major role in promoting prejudice against the aged. It determined that these corporate entities are the most pervasive and systematically identifiable source of negative images of the elderly—images that engender notions of older people as unproductive, disease-ridden and cognitively impaired.

Bound up with that is a dire reality in the US: elderly people are often warehoused in grossly substandard institutions where in far too many cases they are left to vegetate, physically or intellectually, or worse. Suicide is more common among the elderly than any other age group, and there is no reason to believe this is inevitable among people who are physiologically nearer the end of their lives.

During a US Senate hearing on the 2002 study, Emmy-winning actress Doris Roberts, best known for her starring role in the television series, “Everyone Loves Raymond,” told the committee the “my peers and I are portrayed as dependent, helpless, unproductive and demanding rather than deserving. This is not just a sad situation ... This is a crime.”

A new documentary about a New England chorus of senior citizens is a potent antidote to these misconceptions. *Young@Heart*, directed by British documentary maker Stephen Walker, follows the seven-week intensive preparation for a concert tour, called “Alive and Well,” of the 24-member singing group from Northampton, Massachusetts, whose average age is 80 years old.

The original chorus was founded twenty-five years ago at a Northampton nursing home by the group’s current director Bob Cilman (age 53), who with a firm but compassionate hand seeks to bring out in musical form the life-affirming qualities of the choristers—with remarkable results.

On the Young@Heart web site, Cilman writes that the present entertainers range in age from 72 to 88. “There are some with prior professional theater or music experience, others who have performed extensively on the amateur level, and some who never stepped onto a stage before turning eighty. None of the current performers of Y@H were part of the original group that formed in 1982, but they have kept alive the spirit of the early pioneers and continue to push the group into glorious new directions.”

Glorious indeed, and something of a revolution in popular music, as the seniors sing renditions of songs from the Talking Heads, the Clash and Coldplay. For the group members, this genre lends itself to “foot-stomping, hand-clapping—lots of energy,” despite the fact that lyrics must be read with gigantic magnifying glasses and learned with unreliable memories. One member, Lenny, an avid vocalist, harmonica player and bicyclist, is known to occasionally blank out during Jimi Hendrix’s “Purple Haze”.

The difficulties of aging notwithstanding, Young@Heart has toured globally. Fred, forced to leave the chorus because of congestive heart failure, returns for a solo in the Coldplay song, “Fix You.” Breathing with the help of an oxygen machine, Fred jokes that “we went from continent to continent and I became incontinent.” There is real objectivity in the way those featured in the documentary approach nearing the end of their lives. They know they have made a contribution. Enriching audiences is their legacy.

For Fred’s duet partner, Bob—teetering on the edge from a bout with spinal meningitis—singing with Young@Heart has been a lifeline. His wife makes sure that during his latest medical set-back, the tour’s poster is prominently placed in his hospital room.

All members agree that that their choral work helps

them to forget “about creaky bones.” Nonagenarian Eileen, a survivor of the German blitz on London, talks about the importance of keeping the brain working: “It’s true, if you don’t use it, you lost it.”

Audiences are electrified when she steps into the spotlight and belts out the words of the Clash tune: “... I’ll be here ‘til the end of time/ So you got to let me know/ Should I stay or should I go?” It serves as a high voltage challenge to going ‘gentle into that good night’ and the impact is unsettling.

Sonic Youth’s “Schizophrenia” and Allen Toussaint’s “Yes We Can Can,” with its 71 ‘cans’ take on added weight when sung by people with a vast collective experience. The music springs from a well, not a puddle. Whatever is lost in the aging of voices is replaced by depth of understanding. (These are ugly duckling songs, says the light-hearted Fred, not swan songs.)

Nothing is taken for granted. There are no voids or extraneous moments. Young@Heart’s vocals are playful, but essential. Even the youngest of spectators are impressed by the liberating flamboyance of the chorus.

During one rehearsal, Cilman asks if anyone has ever been given last rites. A hand is raised. Cilman asks: “Did you see the white light?” “No, I refused to look at it,” was the answer.

Interspersed throughout *Young@Heart* are several eccentric music videos made by the film’s producer, Sally George. The Ramones “I Wanna be Sedated,” is sung ironically as a message about refusing to have “nothin’ to do and no where to go-o-o.” David Bowie’s “Golden Years,” is an elaborate production number that serves perhaps as the group’s trademark and the Bee Gees’ “Staying Alive” features the surreal setting of a bowling alley.

In a video interview, Cilman explains his dedication to the old people: “It’s about having a sense of urgency. Not wanting to miss anything. What’s great about the chorus is that they don’t hide their age. It’s *about* their age. It’s about getting old and I think that’s what really touches people. People really appreciate the fact that we’re not hiding age. For older people, it’s like ‘right on!’ about what people can do. For younger people, it’s a whole thing about, ‘hey, they’re doing our music!’ and they’re not doing it in an obvious way.”

A 2007 Associated Press review of a concert confirms these sentiments: “When the audience empties out of the theater at the end of Young@Heart’s Dartmouth [College] concert, they are a wide-eyed, flabbergasted mob. Few knew what to expect, and those who thought they knew are shocked.”

In the film, when the group sings Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young” at the Hampshire County Jail, it is evident why these seniors live for their performances. The connection between singers and inmates makes for a moving encounter, offering further proof that “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.”

Or in the words of an inmate: “Best performance I’ve ever seen in my life!”

Cilman speaks about this experience in an interview with *Pop Syndicate*: “I always wanted to do the prison because I thought of all these guys who are there, they’re maybe there for a long time! Fifteen to twenty. They go in young people and they come out old people and they missed most their life and they’re probably thinking there’s nothing left—I’ve destroyed, ruined my life, nothing for them to look forward to and then they see these people who are really old, because the great thing about Young@Heart is they’re really old—there’s nothing young about Young@Heart, and I think that inspires people to believe that there is something to look forward to. I can’t think that of a more important population to make that point across to, the prison population. So, I was always really looking forward to doing it and, boy, it surpassed my expectations by about tenfold. That was the most amazing concert ever for the group.”

Although *Young@Heart* is an artistically rudimentary work, its achievement lies in demonstrating how impoverished is a society that mistreats and abandons such a source of real wealth.

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