

# My Deathbed Playlist (and Yours)

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Now that I'm approaching my mid-40s, I've finally gotten around to some basic end-of-life planning. Health care proxy? Check. Power of attorney? Signed. My playlist for dying? It's done.

Some people find it meaningful to specify the music they would like to be played at their funeral. But before then — just before then, in fact — many of us will face a time when we are still able to experience music, but can no longer choose it for ourselves. Hence my advance directive for music, or what I like to call my singing will.

In many traditions, music is divine. Thomas Carlyle called it the “speech of angels.” But even if music only seems transcendent, it's hard to imagine an experience for which it's better suited than the end of life — a time when music's unique expressive qualities might be particularly precious to us and when, [it's commonly said](#), our hearing may be the last of our senses to depart.

I decided to put together my singing will this summer, after a family friend named Lois died. She was a loving presence to me for my entire life — particularly so in the years since the deaths of my parents, who would not have met without her. I liked to say she was my oldest friend, in both senses.

Lois spent the last week of her life in the same small Western Massachusetts hospital where I was born. In her high corner room overlooking the Berkshires she loved, Lois was often partly conscious. But she was not able to speak with the family and friends who surrounded her.

At the quietest times it occurred to us that Lois, who had volunteered at Tanglewood for many years, might like to hear some music. When we had run through the CDs her family had brought to the hospital, I turned to my smartphone, charging on the windowsill next to a box of tissues, with a suddenly renewed sense of wonder. “Brahms for her, not Beethoven,” a family member advised with a gentle smile. When Lois died on a warm July afternoon, she was listening to a cello piece performed by Yo-Yo Ma, whose Berkshire concerts she had often enjoyed.

Later I came to think of the music we played not as a gift to Lois, but as a final present from her. I was grateful to know what music she loved, and to have had something small to do, when there was nothing else to be done.

Paul Simon once said that music should continue “right on up until you die,” a belief with precedents that are as literal as they are ancient. By the 11th century, Benedictine monks at Cluny had developed an [elaborate ritual](#) for the dying, accompanied by Gregorian chants. The music could last as long as the dying did, easily a week or longer,

according to Fred Paxton, a medieval historian at Connecticut College. The 15th-century Franco-Flemish composer Guillaume Dufay left specific instructions for the music — including his own motet, “Ave regina celorum” — that was to be sung to him on his deathbed.

Half a millennium later, we need only to touch our phone to add the power of music to any hour of life — a genie-like conjuring that previous generations would have regarded as nothing short of miraculous. Indeed, for many music lovers today, such “life soundtracks” aren’t so much a distraction from an experience as a means of deepening it. When I was a headphones-clad teenager, in love with both music and flying, I was deeply attached to the practice of timing just the right song for takeoff or landing. Today, playlists for exercise, road trips and weddings are practically an art form. Spotify recently posted a [“birthing playlist”](#) (Yo-Yo Ma is on it, too); the doctor who helped compile the playlist reports that 70 percent of expectant mothers he treats already make their own.

When it comes to the solemnity of the deathbed, live music is already part of the larger movement to reintegrate death into American culture. In 2014, NPR listeners [heard](#) from the [Threshold Choir](#), founded by Kate Munger in 2000, whose members sing in homes, hospices and hospitals in around 150 communities worldwide. Ms. Munger shared with me the recorded music she hoped to re-encounter near the end of her life — including plenty of folk songs, and Bach’s Mass in B minor. It’s a “remarkable, beautiful, emotionally rich masterpiece” that she’s still surprised she fell in love with at age 14, when, she remembers fondly, her mother first played it for her. But Ms. Munger also emphasized the enormous differences between recorded music, and the deep human connection of live music created in the presence of the dying.

Laura Thomae, a hospice-based music therapist in Philadelphia who has sung for the dying for 12 years, echoed that important distinction. Only “live music can be adapted to mirror, match and change with the varying rhythms of the dying process,” she told me. For Ms. Thomae, a patient’s favorite recorded music can be part of a “life review,” and can also help her find the most individually resonant melodies and themes to incorporate into her personalized work.

Eleventh-century Benedictines would surely have understood the devotion of Ms. Munger and Ms. Thomae, as well as of the family of the folk singer Kate McGarrigle, who [sang to her as she died](#), in 2010. It’s less obvious what the monks would have made of Spotify. But today the dying and their families may be drawn both to rejuvenated traditions of live music and to our new ability to instantly dial up beloved music we’ve chosen in advance — particularly since if there’s time for the former, there will be time for both.

That 15th-century composer, Guillaume Dufay, did not live to hear the deathbed music he’d so carefully tried to cue up. “He was not the only canon to die that day, and he evidently slipped away too fast,” said Margaret Bent, a musicologist at All Souls College, Oxford. Such uncertainties are a good reason for modern music lovers to make a playlist of recorded music in advance. Another reason, of course, is the real possibility that at

some point we'll simply be unable to express our musical preferences. Even those who love us won't know all the music we love — or all the small, long-ago moments that may seem to be embodied, even blessed, by it.

Gregory Melchor-Barz, a professor of ethnomusicology at Vanderbilt University, studies musical rituals around death in AIDS-stricken regions of sub-Saharan Africa, but it was the story of his mother's recent death that he told me first. In her last days he and his siblings sang both to her and with her. At one point, she shouted, "Coconut Joe!" After some puzzlement, Professor Melchor-Barz's brother found a version of the song on his smartphone, a song they hadn't known she loved, or even knew — perhaps, they guessed, from her long-ago childhood in Hawaii. It's only luck, of course, that allowed her to articulate her final musical wishes, which Professor Melchor-Barz described as "a digital memorial not just to my mother, but to our final days together."

Hence the singing will. It's unclear how long to make such a playlist, or indeed how much time we have to make it. Like an actual will, it's something to update regularly. And it won't compare to the live music a loved one or a caring stranger might also create. But on mine so far — don't laugh — is an album by the band Chicago, which was the only cassette tape I owned for some time after I first got a Walkman as a teenager.

Also on it is R.E.M.'s "Texarkana," to which I drove away at an unsafe volume and speed the morning after my high school prom, and Beethoven's Violin Concerto, which my dad loved, and Handel's "Messiah," which my mom and I sometimes sang at a small church that in my memory is always half-buried in snow.

My partner's favorite song — Sufjan Stevens's "Concerning the UFO Sighting Near Highland, Illinois" — is there. Oh, and "Amelia," by Joni Mitchell. It's a song about travel and flying and love. It's music — you know the kind — that on more than a few days has made me happy to be alive, and that I doubt will ever grow old.

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