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## Music on the brain

 By **Maria Rodgers O'Rourke**

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Celebrating our 15th anniversary, my husband and I were a case study in neuromusicology.

Neuromusicology is an exciting field of research that explores the connections between music and the human brain. In recent years, scientists have made fascinating inroads into understanding music, its impact on memory and the emotions it triggers.

Our anniversary celebration included all of it. We joined about 200 boomer-age fans at an intimate acoustic concert by America, a folk/rock band that recorded most of its hits in the 1970s. The energy in the room was palpable; everyone in the crowd seemed to have a deep personal attachment to the music. That's not surprising; most of us came of age in the period when these songs were playing on the radio.

Joseph LeDoux says rock concerts are a great environment for generating memories. "At a concert, there's a lot of intensity: The music is loud and driving, the crowd is swaying, the guy is dancing around onstage. There's a lot of stuff going on. Emotional upheaval like that is very good at storing memories."

Breakout\_1

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LeDoux, a pioneering researcher into the dynamics of human emotions, is the Henry and Lucy Moses Professor of Science at New York University's Center for Neural Science and director of the Center for the Neuroscience of Fear and Anxiety. He spoke expansively about the power of music in an interview last summer with Salon.com.

Artists, marketers and moms understand music's power to influence, soothe or excite people. One reason is that it activates neural systems of reward and emotion, according to LeDoux. "If you have a positive experience and a song is playing," he explains, "then that positive experience attaches to that song, and the song itself becomes a reward."

Or, as the Rolling Stones better expressed it, I know it's only rock 'n' roll, but I like it.

LeDoux's findings suggest that the people at the America concert, like music fans everywhere, are involved with two kinds of memories: With the first, hearing the old songs traces a path back to the experiences that accompanied the initial hearings of them. With the other, the music combines with the emotional intensity of the concert to forge new memories.

The two kinds of memory came together for me during the chorus of "Daisy Jane." The singer's plaintive voice evoked memories of teenage love and heartache. Now in midlife and sharing the concert with my husband, I felt more joyful, the new experience leading to a wholly different emotional experience of the song.

Savvy marketers capitalize on the phenomenal power of music by using classic rock in advertising campaigns. Targeted at baby boomers, the ads use great songs to pitch everything from cars to floor care products, computers to fast food. The hope is that we'll associate their products and services with the good feelings stimulated by the songs.

It doesn't work for me or, I suspect, for lots of others my age. When I come across ads featuring a favorite song, I change the channel. I'm not about to let some huckster replace the memories I associate with songs with messages about some product.

Music is an expression of the natural and biological rhythms found in our world, says LeDoux. The circadian and seasonal cycles and the sound of the heart beating or lungs breathing are the inherent rhythms of the human experience. What naturally evolved from this primal truth is music's inextricable presence in cultures around the world.

As we age, my husband and I will take advantage of other neuromusiological discoveries, including the strengthening of cognitive abilities that degenerate over time, like memory, with music. This "synaptic plasticity" is possible for anyone at any age, according to LeDoux.

Taking the old stuff and making it new? Music to my ears.

**Maria Rodgers O'Rourke of Creve Coeur has worked in the advertising and not-for-profit fields and now juggles marriage, raising two daughters and creative pursuits that include music, theater and writing.**

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