

The ReMissions: Musical Advocacy for Cancer Awareness

By Dana Ataya, MD

Music can change the world because it can change people.

Bono¹



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Almost three years ago I took a leap of courage and emailed the new CEO of my hospital system with a simple message: “When is band practice?” The email marked the beginning of Moffitt Cancer Center’s band The ReMissions and my first step into musical advocacy—combining my lifelong passion for music with my calling to save more lives from breast cancer. When I tell this story, many imagine me shooting off a quick, confident email in my trademark cheeky style. The reality: I stared at the email for 15 minutes before screwing my eyes shut and hitting the send button, silently praying I wouldn’t botch the opportunity. Thankfully, I didn’t. The rest is history.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve spent my life intuitively tapping into the healing power of music. Music and songwriting have been tools I’ve used to process and explore my emotions and experiences, personally and as a physician and caregiver. In my practice as a breast radiologist, music has been an important medium in emotionally connecting with and supporting my patients. The incorporation of music into my breast radiology practice has evolved and grown over the years.

It began with simply discussing music with my patients and bonding with them to foster connection while performing a biopsy. With support from my breast imaging technologists, music evolved into an anxiety-reducing sensory experience, with technologist deejays playing patient-selected music. The simple act of empowering a woman to choose her own music during a stressful experience creates connection. Although this has not been a personal area of research, I’ve noticed empirically that patients leave with more satisfaction because they have had more touch points and enhanced connections among the patient, physician, and technologist.

Published studies have demonstrated the positive impact of music on our bodies and minds. Music can lower blood pressure, reduce anxiety, boost dopamine level, lower cortisol level, and improve sleep quality, mental alertness, and memory.^{2,3} Perioperative music therapy has been shown to significantly reduce postoperative pain and anxiety and avoid fluctuations in blood pressure and heart rate.⁴ In breast cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, music improves quality of life and reduces depression and vomiting.⁵ The

effect of music on our bodies is remarkable, but I believe music can do even more.

Like all art forms, music is a language of connection and can be a vehicle of change. The most powerful music tells an authentic story, communicates feelings fearlessly, and reminds us that we are not alone. This vulnerability is critical for meaningful change.⁶ We are wired for human connection, and when we have the courage to share our stories vulnerably and authentically, our call to action can be felt, not just heard. Music offers a medium for this vulnerability and connection, communicating a call to action in a powerful way.

As the lead vocalist for The ReMissions, I have the privilege of performing music with a multidisciplinary team of talented professionals from across Moffitt Cancer Center—executive leaders, physicians, scientists, nurses, research support personnel, and security personnel. We live at the intersection of mission, passion, vocation, and profession (*ikigai*)⁷ and use music to communicate a call to action to save more lives from cancer. The four primary elements of *ikigai* fuel our music and our mission to move the needle in cancer care. There is no better feeling, and I am intensely grateful to be living at this intersection.

Over the past year, the number of musical advocacy engagements with The ReMissions has soared. We have performed at a variety of events ranging from large community outreach functions to more intimate philanthropic events. United by our passion for music and our mission to improve cancer outcomes for our patients, we have used music to raise awareness about the importance of cancer screening and cancer research. With increasing exposure, we have had local media outlets, generous philanthropists, and patients visit Moffitt to learn more about The ReMissions, cancer research, and our mission. When I had the recent opportunity to sing the national anthem at a Major League Baseball game, my message about the importance of cancer screening reached over 18,000 people in the stadium. The biggest reward? Women connecting with me after the anthem, inspired by the music and the message, committed to getting a screening mammogram.

On October 7, The ReMissions will open for the Grammy Award-winning band Chicago at a sold-out benefit concert. Am I still pinching myself? Yes. Am I undeniably grateful? Absolutely. I am thrilled that the proceeds from this concert will go directly to fund breast cancer research. For the first time, our musical set will incorporate original music I've written that has been inspired by the brave stories of my breast cancer patients. On that stage and beyond, The ReMissions will be using music to spotlight patient stories and highlight the importance of screening in saving lives from breast cancer.

As a breast radiologist and musician, I believe in creating music and connections that heal and inspire. Music backed by mission can change people. And if music can change people, it can revolutionize the way we advocate for our patients in our fight against cancer.

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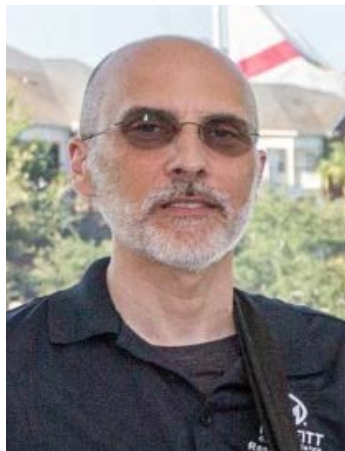
Jeffrey Leighton, RN, bass guitar; code nurse.



James Mule, PhD, electric guitar; associate center director of translational science.



Mark Robertson-Tessi, PhD, mandolin, electric guitar, backup vocals; applied research scientist, integrated mathematical oncology.



Mike Tworoger, acoustic guitar; manager of Research Support Services.



Shelley Tworoger, PhD, backup vocals; associate center director of population science.



Ron Zalva, drums; security officer.