

In the summer of 2015, I was in Chicago taping an appearance on NPR's comedy quiz show *Wait Wait . . . Don't Tell Me!* By that point I'd been a regular panelist on the show for over a decade, so I was used to all sorts of big-name special guests coming on to gab with us. I mean, who could top Dick Van Dyke when he actually sang the little-known lyrics to *The Dick Van Dyke Show* theme for us? We'd had presidents, Supreme Court justices, and tech titans on to answer completely absurd questions. (When Microsoft's then-CEO Steve Ballmer appeared, host Peter Sagal quizzed him on—you guessed it—lip balm.)

But this appearance was different. Instead of recording in the basement auditorium where we'd been doing the show for years, this episode was taping outdoors, in Millennium Park's Pritzker Pavilion, in front of thousands of fans—thousands of *young* fans, since the special guest was twenty-two-year-old hip-hop superstar Chance the Rapper. People were screaming. A few were trying to *climb onto the stage*. Much as I love our NPR audience, they don't typically show this kind of enthusiasm. Okay, for Neil deGrasse Tyson or Ina Garten they come close. But this was a whole other level of energy.

Chance the Rapper was charming, telling us about impersonating Michael Jackson at his kindergarten graduation. Pretty much every comment he made elicited a shriek, even when he talked about his grandmother and copped to being a "nice boy rapper." I did my best to play the role of the middle-aged dorky white guy who grew up on show tunes, a role that comes naturally to me. (When we talked about his writing process, I cited my own favorite rhyme of all time, from the musical *Funny Girl*: "Kid, my heart ain't made of marble / But your rhythm's really horrible.") Chance played ball and the audience seemed to enjoy it.

And then I asked Chance a question that I didn't intend seriously, at least not consciously: "Would you please give it to me straight? I'm forty-six. Is it too late for me to become a rapper?" The question itself got a laugh.

"No, I don't think so," Chance answered with a straight face. "Some people might say it's too *soon* for you to become a rapper." There was another big laugh, and the conversation moved on. Peter Sagal would go on to quiz Chance on "Saran the Wrapper."

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But I was stopped dead by Chance's comment. In that moment, I realized that I had already begun thinking of my life as one of progressively fewer opportunities, of doors closing. I had accepted the conventional wisdom that the older I was getting, the fewer avenues would be open to me; that aging was a process solely of gradually diminishing capacities. Basically, though I wouldn't have admitted it even to myself, I saw myself as over the hill. Mind you, I was *forty-six*!

But Chance had flipped the script on me. Why *was* I too old to be a rapper? Okay, you're laughing. And the truth is, my beatboxing is really not where it should be. On the other hand, getting older was only going to *increase* the likelihood that I'd gain the life experience and wisdom and skillz (FYI, that's how the kids spell it) necessary for meaningful creative expression.

I wouldn't be able to write this if I'd been born fifty years earlier. Men born in the United States in 1919 lived on average to fifty-three. Considering I'm fifty-five right now, I wouldn't be able to write anything at all. But in 2024, if you're in your forties, fifties, or sixties and reasonably healthy, then—to quote one of my favorite lyrics from *Bye Bye Birdie*—there's such a lot of livin' to do. (Incidentally, *Bye Bye Birdie* starred the aforementioned Dick Van Dyke, who as of this writing is ninety-eight and still singing in a barbershop quartet.)

Don't take my word for it. According to renowned geriatrician Louise Aronson, author of *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*, “We've added a couple of decades, essentially an entire generation, onto our lives, and we haven't kind of socio-culturally figured out how to handle that.” Today turning one hundred is no big deal. The big question is what to do with all that extra time.

Fortunately, there are plenty of models from yesterday—and more and more each day—who came into their own at the stage of life when society would have had them packing it in. My coauthor, Jonathan Greenberg, and I call these individuals Roctogenarians.

Some of the people in this book were unknown before they broke through.

## Introduction

Laura Ingalls Wilder published her first *Little House* book at sixty-five. A near-broke Harland David Sanders was just a year older when he hit the road with a bucket of the seasoning that would help make Colonel Sanders the face of a Kentucky-fried empire. Both were mere chicks compared to abstract expressionist artist Carmen Herrera. She was 101 when she had her first solo exhibition at a major museum. It took that long for the critics to catch up to her.

Some broke through early in life and kept getting noticed, peaking in their final chapters—a late-in-life capstone to a monumental life. Fittingly, architects are well represented in this group. Frank Lloyd Wright submitting his design for the Guggenheim at eighty-four is the ultimate mic drop. Rita Moreno is also in this category. One of Hollywood’s first EGOTs, she’s still got it in her nineties.

Others had unfinished business that needed settling. Brian May was an aspiring astrophysicist when his musical talent sent him shooting in an entirely different direction—and he became the superstar lead guitarist for Queen. But he never forgot his first love and at sixty went back to school to earn his PhD in astrophysics. Swimmer Diana Nyad managed to put her own dream aside for thirty years. But who was she kidding? She had to complete that swim from Cuba to Florida—and she did so at sixty-four.

One thing everyone in this book has in common: a belief that late life is no time to surrender. Perhaps no one epitomizes that like Mary Church Terrell, who was born just nine months after the Emancipation Proclamation to parents who had been enslaved. As a young woman, Terrell was a leader in the fight against the barbaric practice of lynching. In her middle age, she cofounded the NAACP. And at the age of eighty-six—when she had more than earned her rest—this veteran led sit-ins at a Washington, DC, lunch counter. The ensuing lawsuit resulted in the legal desegregation of the nation’s capital.

Terrell was fighting not for herself but for the future. So was Samuel Whittemore. The seventy-eight-year-old patriot took up arms on the very first day of the American Revolutionary War, had his face blown off by a redcoat . . . and kept

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on fighting. No retirement for him. Or for Mr. Pickles the tortoise, who at ninety became a first-time father. Seriously, if you have kids at ninety, you cannot afford to retire. Mr. Pickles isn't the only one to find love late in life. Hello, Carol Channing. The woman famous for playing matchmaker Dolly Levi reconnected with a junior high school crush and, happy at last, married at eighty-two.

We're not trying to sugarcoat things here. There are inevitable challenges that come with aging, especially physical ones. How those challenges are handled makes the key—and inspiring—difference. Henri Matisse was in his seventies when the ravages of cancer made painting too difficult. But he didn't stop creating. Instead, he traded his paintbrush for a pair of scissors and began making his celebrated series of paper cut-outs. Describing one of his most exuberant paper creations, *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*, Matisse wrote, "As I am obliged to remain in bed because of my health, I made a little garden around me where I can walk. There are leaves, fruit, a bird. I am the parakeet. And I have found myself in the work."

May you, the reader, the future Roctogenarian, find yourself in these pages.