

Singing Along with Persons Living with Dementia

Don Wendorf

Don't even think about doing singalongs with persons living with dementia unless you are fully prepared to accept the consequences: 1. Having an outrageously good time and 2. Feeling deliciously good about having made a small but highly meaningful difference in several lives, including your own. So, if you really think you're up to it, let me offer a few tips I've learned from my experiences doing singalongs at a number of respite or adult day care or memory cafe programs. The main thing for me is to keep in mind the choice of prepositions in my title and first sentence above. Notice I said "with" and not "for." My primary objective is a human encounter where each of us makes our contributions to a shared, joyful event.

I try to make it as musically satisfying for all concerned as possible (including me: if a Bbm7b5 or F#dim chord fits, it goes in); but it is not primarily a *performance "for"* as much as an *interaction "with"* that I'm after. Everything should be planned toward that goal. Musical performances are wonderful and I love doing those, too; but, that's a little different ball game to me. I'm singing *with* "persons living with dementia," usually some program volunteers and staff and sometimes some care partners ("partners" rather than "caregivers"). Again, terminology can be important here and I'm talking about "persons" (you're still a person if you have a dementia diagnosis) who are "living with" dementia (you don't die the day after your diagnosis). Persons living with dementia still have the same needs for friendship, loving, spirituality, feeling competent, playing, having fun, being creative, sharing with and giving to. I want involvement and interaction.

So, I keep a constant dialogue going, heavy on the humor, teasing, playfulness, stories, challenging and silliness. I ask music trivia questions (“Who knows who wrote this song?” rather than “Do you *remember*...?”), improvise on what participants say and do, get goofy, comment on fun facts about the songs, and keep things very flowing, spontaneous and interactional. Humor, music, and conversation connect us in sharing the common experience of being human and affirming each other as persons. Be present and be open.

I’m constantly looking for things each person might do to be as fully engaged as possible and I encourage singing, clapping, foot-tapping, whistling, finger-snapping, dancing: even yodeling for the really adventurous folks (most won’t be able to yodel any better than me but it’s so much fun to try). I’ll have someone play my tambourine, ask another if they’d like to hold and share a printed copy of the lyrics, and get one person to help someone else read lyrics (people want to help each other and contribute; volunteers can also be very useful here). I try to do requested songs not in that day’s list if I can pull them off musically. I repeatedly call everyone by the name on their name tag, make sure my LARGE name tag is on (I like it when you can’t easily tell who has dementia and who doesn’t) and have as much direct contact with each as is appropriate (shaking hands, pat on the shoulder, handing them props or rhythm instruments, etc.). That goes for volunteers, too. Everyone, with or without dementia, wants to be *known* (when a new participant, Mary Lou, first came I greeted her with the Ricky Nelson song, “Hello Mary Lou”). This is my style and you can and should have your own. The point is to make it very casual, personal, comfortable and fun for everyone, just as you’d be joining friends in your living room for a

picking and grinning party. It's about relationships and supporting personhood.

Expect the unexpected and go with it. Ad lib with what is happening over your planned set list. For example, at one singalong several participants got up and started dancing. One group marched on "When the Saints Go Marching In." At another, a participant had a finger puppet he called Leon. So, we let Leon lead a couple of songs and we now bring puppets of our own to go with particular songs. Be creative and never underestimate what "persons living with dementia" **CAN STILL DO**. Bring out and support that competency. At one venue a guy had a harmonica in his pocket and we brought him into a couple of tunes in his key. He will never make a career on harmonica, but he felt so good at being able to do something competently, to contribute to the group and to be known as a musician. One man brought his guitar and played blues with us and a former church organist played a hymn when another musician brought his keyboard. I've had several former choir directors conduct the rest of the group although they could no longer sing themselves. It is also very commonplace that someone who is usually very reserved or silent or withdrawn will come alive with the music. Those magic moments make it all worthwhile. Not only that, but the good feelings and happy mood will last long after the session is over, sometimes for days.

At the same time, be aware that dementia is all too real and there are real limitations in ability to be dealt with, such that some people will tire faster or lapse in attention or be unable to multi-task like in doing art and music at the same time or conversing and singing, too. Some may need a little extra time to communicate their comment or formulate their answer (volunteers should pause before answering themselves) or need

to be able to withdraw a bit if the stimulation gets a bit too intense. Others may only be able to sit and listen silently; but they can still be treated as part of the group with comments, eye contact, holding a songbook, etc. One of my favorite participants is a lady who never sings a word, but her radiant smile shows how totally aware and present she is in the experience. My basic assumption is that the core, essence, personhood, soul of the person is still there despite the disabilities and we may be able to find a way to tap into that, with or without words.

Music has a special power all its own for all of us and that very much includes persons with dementia. It can spark memories, elicit emotions, let “selves” emerge, increase communication, brighten moods and help us connect with each other. There are people who can no longer converse well but who may still be able to sing all the words with you and enjoy the social encounter immensely. They may not understand or remember or be able to label exactly who you are but they may feel the caring you have for them and know you are someone to relate to who wants to relate to them. Always allow time for people to share reactions or feelings or comments or memories. Ask for them throughout the session.

It's important to know who your “audience” is. What are their demographics in terms of age (Boomers often like different songs from their parents' generation), ethnicity (repertoire may vary some if African-American, Jewish versus Christian, although everyone seems to like Motown), and level of functioning (but be careful not to underestimate potential)? Having staff or volunteers involved may expand possibilities as well as adding to the fun if there aren't too many. I want them to feel how special they are and to have just as good a time, because that will transfer right back into the participants. So, I include them in all my playing,

teasing, quizzing, etc. and let them know how much they are appreciated.

I prefer a smaller audience, maybe 20 or so total, and a physical setting where I am very close and can meet folks eyeball to eyeball. I like it intimate. It's nice to have an environment that is not too loud in ambient noise or too busy or cluttered, as some people may get distracted or feel bombarded by stimuli and have to leave or just shut down. Learn about your particular group's program and history. I've found some that have their own traditions and expectations it's nice to blend into. For example, one group liked to stand, hold hands and sing "Stand By Me" together. Another loved "My Girl" and we'd all stand, snap fingers and divide the chorus part into three groups as the chord ascended on the "my girl" lyric. One liked to end with "Happy Trails to You" while another always recited an Irish blessing together.

I like to sometimes have one or two other musicians with me when available, as it expands what I can offer musically and I always bring several different instruments to spice up the variety. Some participants will not sing and just listen, another reason I want it to be well done musically. They deserve it (and the music deserves it). I'll usually bring a tenor banjo or tenor guitar for old jazz standards (e.g. "All of Me" or "Blue Skies"), a 5-string open back banjo for clawhammer style old time Southern gospel (EVERYONE in the South knows "I'll Fly Away" or "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms": it's in the water supply), and a mandolin and harmonica if someone else handles guitar. But, just a single guitar or a keyboard is perfectly fine. I also think it's fine to take little solo breaks as long as you don't turn it into a performance rather than a shared endeavor. I have fun and get playful with my

fellow musician(s), too, but my rule is to always make it expand to include the participants as shared enjoyment.

I choose songs carefully. I want to do material that will spark old memories and nostalgic feelings. Stuff from our childhood (many of us had to endure Lawrence Welk or Sing Along with Mitch). But, I want them to be singable, not too complicated or requiring a voice like Nat King Cole, which few of us have. Usually, people will know or recognize the old melodies but probably not all the lyrics, although you'd be surprised. So, I try to pick ones not done all the time in singalongs but very familiar and accessible and I provide the lyrics for everyone. Songs with easy to learn, repeating chorus lyrics are great, too, where I may sing the verses and everyone joins in on the chorus. I'm always looking for a blend of songs that are familiar and easy to sing with those that will spark different or new memories or encourage new learning or give variety. But, I still include some of the old singalong standards, like "You Are My Sunshine" because for many it's so comfortable and enjoyable to be able to sing those familiar tunes.

I have used songbooks I've made with lyrics and basic chords, too, in case there are unexpected musicians joining in. I mixed up the loose-leaf binder (with plastic sleeves for easy changes) repertoire with nostalgia rock (Motown), hymns and gospel ("Amazing Grace"), songs from the "great American songbook" or Tin Pan Alley (e.g. "Sweet Georgia Brown" where I ask them to whistle, too), campfire and folk ("This Land is Your Land"), seasonal ("Jingle Bells," bring some bells for folks to jingle), patriotic ("America the Beautiful"), and currently popular ("In the Jailhouse" where I tease them into trying to yodel...ghastly). I tried to make the words fit on one page and on the opposite page I put an image I have downloaded and printed

to go along with the song visually for extra stimulation, creativity, mental exercise, conversation and fun. This might be cartoons, a photo of the composer or singer who made a hit on the song, funny associations, anything to stimulate some memories or reactions. I'll often have props that fit the song like a candy bar or a globe or a baby doll and I usually change hats half a dozen times to go with the particular song. It's nice if the lyrics and visual downloads can be projected onto a large screen and I now use computer slideshow programs if the computer and monitor situation is available. I pass out printed lyrics or have someone point to the lyrics on the screen as we sing, much like the old "follow the bouncing ball" in movie or tv singalongs. Having the lyrics projected on a big screen is helpful if folks are playing rhythm instruments as it's hard to play and juggle printed lyrics at the same time. Sometimes respite or day care or memory café programs have a theme for the day that I try to tap into if there are songs that fit it.

People should be encouraged to share their observations, recollections, emotional reactions, etc. about any and all of this if they want to. I generally try to steer away from what I imagine every other singalong includes, just for novelty and new stimulation. But, no one ever objects to "This Land is Your Land," although I can get tired of doing the same pieces over and over. I often group songs into a special theme for that day, especially like Old Disney tunes ("Mickey Mouse Club March"), Cowboy Songs ("Red River Valley"), Nostalgia Rock ("Bye Bye Love"), Vintage TV Show Themes ("Beverly Hillbillies") and Commercials (Coca Cola), Bird Songs ("Yellow Bird"), Hymns and Gospel Tunes ("Just a Little Talk with Jesus"), songs with colors in the titles ("Blue Moon"), etc. Remember that the goals are maximum participation, connection, stimulation and shared enjoyment,

including among the volunteers and staff. We're affirming and nurturing personhood.

During the Covid pandemic we had to do our singalongs online through Zoom sessions. These are doable and even make it easier to display visual stimuli. However, the technology and separateness does restrict some of the free flow of interaction and intimacy of being in person. Some people may need assistance managing the computer (like unmuting) and lyrics and I liked it when care partners or other family members at home would get involved. I tried to be more conscious about frequently asking people to respond or make comments or say how they were reacting or what memories or associations they had to the music. I also did some very "quick and dirty" home videos of some of our songs for program staff to send participants YouTube links to, to use at home on their own. As always, you go with the flow.

You do have to be aware that these friends of yours are living with dementia, which is a progressive disease. Over time, you will see some declining in cognitive and communicative abilities. It is painful to watch people you've come to love struggle with these changes. We have had several drop out as they could no longer participate and a few have died (I actually sang Bill's favorite song at his funeral service: "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It"!! The pastor didn't know what to think). The redemptive aspect is knowing that you've helped to make their lives more fulfilling and joyful and connected in a very special way.

So, that's basically it. If you think you can tolerate sharing this much pleasure, satisfaction and friendship, then know that **YOU CAN DO THIS** and I sure do hope **YOU WILL**.