

Five Reasons Why Folk Songs Are So Important

(And some big news!)

by Mary Sue Wilkinson,
Founder of Singing Heart to Heart

Why am I such a big fan of folk songs, especially for people living with dementia and their care partners and families?

There are five reasons I can think of right off the top of my head.

Let me explain.

1. Folk songs spark memories.

Each week after our sing along Waunita tells me, “My dad died when I was young. It was just my mom and me and my two sisters. Every night after dinner we would sing these old songs together. We were too poor to have a piano, but we sang every evening. These old songs sure do bring up memories.” Need I say more?

2. Folk songs connect the generations.

I’ll use my family as an example. Leon is two. His mom and dad are 30, his grandma is 65 (that’s me). And his great grandpa is 91. What can we all sing together? Old McDonald, Baa Baa Black Sheep, I’ve Been Working on the Railroad, and so on. Leon dances, sings, and loves making the animal sounds. (It’s great for his language development.) Great grandpa Jack and everyone in between can sing along and participate. No one is left out.

3. Folk songs are often simple and repetitive. Singing them helps everyone feel competent.

The most popular folk song I sing is this one. Notice how simple it is and how it repeats. And there are many more folk songs that have an easy, repetitious chorus. From Diamonds to Rubies, and often even Pearls, this song offers a way to be successful.

*My Bonnie lies over the ocean
My Bonnie lies over the sea
My Bonnie lies over the ocean
Oh bring back my Bonnie to me
Bring back, bring back, oh bring back my Bonnie to me, to me
Bring back, bring back, oh bring back my Bonnie to me.*

4. Folk songs are the quickest way to engage your staff.

Amanda works in housekeeping. She is passing through the living room where we are gathered to sing. I see her singing along on a line or two as she walks by. Angie, the hospice nurse, is in the back working on charts. I see her lips moving to a familiar song. The cook comes into the room to check on timing for a meal. He pauses to sing a chorus or two with us. The quiet CNA standing behind the med cart calls out “elephant”

for *Old McDonald* and then proceeds to do a very effective elephant trumpet. We all laugh and everyone feels like they are part of the group. It's almost as if folk songs catch people off guard and they can't help but sing along. Why? Because childhood memories click in and people suddenly feel comfortable singing. Younger staff members may not know the standards from the 40s that elders often love. But they probably sang at least a few folk songs at home or at school or at camp. And staff members like to feel competent too. Folk songs can blur the lines between care partners and care recipients.

And last but not least:

5. Folk songs are often funny.

"Do you ever feel like an old grey mare?" There are chuckles of recognition. Pointing to my own grey hair, I laugh and then begin to sing:

*The old grey mare she ain't what she used to be
Ain't what she used to be
Ain't what she used to be
The old grey mare she ain't what she used to be
Many long years ago.*

Too often I find laughter is in short supply. My motto? "The more funny songs the better." How about *Old McDonald*, *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain*, *Polly Wolly Doodle*.

So there you have it. Five great reasons to sing old folk songs.

And now, drum roll... Here's the news! I just released a new CD.

***Sing Along with Mary Sue: Folk Song Favorites for Young and Old* is now available!**

This collection harkens back to a time when families gathered together on the front porch or around the fireplace to sing. I made it for all the reasons above and because these songs are timeless. It starts with *Hail, Hail the Gang's All Here* and wraps up with *Goodbye Ladies*. In between is a well-organized sing along, suitable for individuals or for groups large or small, of any age. Among the 19 songs you'll find *Old McDonald*, *I've Been Working on the Railroad*, *Polly Wolly Doodle*, *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain*, and many more.

You can see the complete song list and purchase it as a CD or as a digital download on my [website](#). The arrangements are simple and the vocals clear and easy to follow. You can also purchase a printable PDF of a songbook to go with it, and then make as many copies as you need. (Note: The CD and download are also available on Amazon. The songbook is only available on my website.)

So let's sing folk songs together! Drop me a line and let me know what your favorites are. I'd love to hear from you.

I'm Mary Sue. I grew up in Iowa in a musical family and I've been singing as long as I can remember. I got my first guitar when I was twelve years old. My mom saved up green stamps to buy it for me. (Thanks mom!)

*I'm the founder of **Singing Heart to Heart and the Young at Heart Music Program**. My passion for singing with elders started when I sang for my father-in-law who had dementia. He had lost all language but when I sang the hymns he knew and loved; he could sing every word. Perfect pitch. He even added harmony.*

*I quickly learned what research is now documenting. **Music is a powerful tool to help us connect, find joy, and spark memories.** Especially for people living with dementia. I've seen this first hand. I lead over 400 singing and music experiences for seniors each year.*

*I'm a career educator, a certified music teacher, an experienced speaker and trainer, and a professional musician. I'm also the author of **Songs You Know by Heart: A Simple Guide for Using Music in Dementia Care**. Teepa Snow endorses my book and my work.*