

# How a Playlist Keeps My Family Connected to My Late Father

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On a recent grocery run, my son, Jack, asked me to play Neil Diamond's "Beautiful Noise." Most 7-year-olds ask for a Disney or *Minecraft* soundtrack. Not Jack. From the time he was 3 years old, Jack was crooning Neil Diamond hits.

It didn't happen by design. Diamond's songs were just among the 1,500-plus tracks on our family iPod. But I quickly discovered that Jack's love of Neil Diamond could become the thread that tied him to my late father, who died when Jack was 4.

The legendary singer was among my dad's favorite artists. Every time he heard "Sweet Caroline," Dad joined in for the chorus in his tone-deaf singing voice as if he was on stage at the Hollywood Bowl. Now when I catch that tune on our iPod—and hear Jack singing along from the back of my minivan—I feel viscerally connected to my dad.

It turns out, using music to strengthen familial ties isn't unfounded. Studies like this one, published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, show pre-school-age children form social bonds, based in part, on song. By age 2 or 3, kids can reproduce songs their caregivers sing with remarkable pitch and tone, and children show greater fluency in song than in speech.

"Music transcends any age, language, religion, or cultural background," says anthropologist Luke Glowacki, a professor at Boston University. "It provides a mechanism to bring people together and help them adapt to new environments and overcome challenges."

Studies like this one published in *American Psychology* suggest that music serves as a powerful tool to bolster social connections, even when people are physically distant. The networks in your brain that are involved in singing overlap with those related to social affiliation and connectedness. Plus, singing along to your favorite tunes activates the brain's reward system, flooding the body with bonding chemicals like dopamine and oxytocin.

The more I delved into the research, the more I wanted to tap into music's uncanny ability to excavate memories and bring people together. My first thought was to create a playlist of my dad's favorite tunes. Whether you use Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music, or SoundCloud, most playlist apps have technology that helps you fashion playlists from just a few song titles. But according to Patrick Savage, director of the Keio University CompMusic Lab in Fujisawa, Japan, you can create a more meaningful playlist by talking to loved ones and identifying songs that remind you of the memories you shared.

So I started a text thread among my multigenerational family members with two questions: "Which songs remind you of Dad?" and "Do you have a specific memory tied to each song on your list?"

Their responses uncovered things I didn't know about my father. Mom texted that Dad fell in love with the Beach Boys' "Surfing Safari," then attempted to surf and failed (as evidenced by the scar on his cheek.) My sister recalled Dad singing Barry Manilow's "I Made It Through the Rain" during long road trips. And my brother-in-law chimed in with a memory of Dad trying to master his moves to "Boot Scootin' Boogie" and nearly taking out half the people on the dance floor.

I added each of these songs to a shared Spotify playlist I named "Dad" and encouraged my relatives to add more to the queue. Fortunately for my sometimes tech-averse family, creating the playlist was as easy as clicking three dots to add songs, share the list, and collaborate. In that way, creating a playlist became an interactive walk down memory lane for the whole family—and a dramatic upgrade from the days where you had to purchase music, make a mixtape, and ship a copy to each family member.

For me, listening to the carefully curated "Dad" playlist and viewing the accompanying music video my brother-in-law created on Vimeo brought me back to cherished moments with my father—how he shimmied through our living room singing Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" and transformed himself into the perfect swing dancing partner when "In the Mood" played during family weddings.

Apparently, I'm not the only one turning to music as a substitute for real-world comfort and connection. A 2021 study, published in *Humanities & Social Sciences Connections*, revealed that more than half of the 5,000 people surveyed about their music listening habits during the pandemic reported engaging in music to cope, both in terms of emotional regulation and also as a proxy for social interaction (take TikTok challenges, for example). The strategy works, in part, because music has the capacity to instantly transport you to a different place and time with just a few notes.

"Music taps into the emotional center of the brain, and it's strongly associated with memory," Glowacki says. "If you hear a piece of music, you can pull up the emotions, the affect you had from other times in your life when you heard it. It's an immediate sensory response in a way that spoken language is not."

With modern recording technology, we're able to passively listen to music, but historically music was always participatory. "There's this sense that you have to be a musician to sing, but that's not the way it was for most of history and that's not the way it has to be," Savage says. Plus, making music—and singing along to it karaoke style, even if you're tone-deaf—has a host of health benefits. This study, published in the *Journal of Voice*, says that singing can boost immunity and enhance cooperation among community members. It's almost instinctual; a sort of evolutionary survival mechanism.

"If you can sing a song, hum a tune, or whistle a melody you have the power to unite people, even if you don't speak a word of their language," Glowacki says. Walk into any dueling piano bar where vocalists are singing "Sweet Caroline" and you'll undoubtedly see patrons jump to their feet singing at the top of their lungs, "so good, so good, so good" in unison.

The euphoria that happens when you become part of the music can foster positive connections between people and bond them together, says Glowacki. That's why people across the globe are using advanced technology like JackTrip for real-time synchronized virtual jam sessions or combining services like Zoom and YouTube to have virtual karaoke parties. Even widely used social media like TikTok allow remote collaboration. The TikTok sea shanties revival is a prime example. "People really got into the experience of doing these virtual duets. One person would sing. Another would layer in a harmony," Savage says.

Dubbed "coronamusic," this outpouring of musical creativity resulted in musical sets inspired by the pandemic. People composed new music, created themed playlists, and reimagined favorite songs. Professional musicians ranging from Garth Brooks to Lady Gaga livestreamed concerts with tens of thousands of viewers watching from their living rooms. Add it all together and people began to feel like they had company, even when they were on their own.

While my family hasn't launched a TikTok challenge (yet), or streamed our performance of "Surfing Safari" on Instagram, we have become more intentional about strengthening our bonds through song. Recently, we created music videos of our children dancing beneath the disco lights my husband installed in our hallway. They look ridiculous, of course, but as I watch the unbridled joy the playlist inspires in them, I can almost sense my dad beaming with pride.

"This is one of grandpa's favorites," Jack declares, while shaking his booty in the hallway. "Mommy, can you turn it up? And start it over?" There's nothing I'd rather do.

I know Jack probably won't remember my dad, but he will appreciate my father's love of Neil Diamond. Now when I hear Jack singing the words to his favorite Neil Diamond song—and his favorite seems to change daily—I join in the chorus and think to myself, "What a Beautiful Noise." And I feel certain, somewhere, somehow, my dad is humming along.

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