

#52 Ancestors 2021 - Week 13 Music

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Week 13

Music

Music was a big part of my mother's life, and I believe it was because of the influence of her mother, Josephine Whitten (nee Morgan).

Josephine married into the Whitten family who adhered to fairly strict Methodist principles. There was no alcohol, no dancing and no cards. But Josephine and her sister Elsie loved to sing and so at least in their household there were piano lessons and family singing around the piano.

For Mum, the lessons didn't last long – the teacher was one of those ruler-wielding nuns who sucked all the joy out of playing. Mum was lucky – she could continue to play by ear. She believed, like her mother, that music and singing were part of a happy and optimistic outlook on life and she didn't let the lack of formal training get in the way of her enjoyment.

Dad had come from a different tradition. There was no formal training and no instruments in his childhood but his father and his grandfather both sang - mainly Irish songs – and he discovered classical music at University. When he met Mum and her family, he joined in their musical evenings and he and Mum loved to sing together. They sang at their wedding reception – the song, “My Hero” from a popular musical of the 1940's called “The Chocolate Soldier”

We had no piano when I was growing up but Mum and Dad sang at home and, especially, on the many long car trips we took to visit relatives. There were no car radios in the 50's and early 60's so this is when we children learnt the songs of Gilbert and Sullivan, and Cole Porter and Irving Berlin and the popular songs of WWII. Dad loved the songs that his Irish grandfather had sung (“The Rose of Tralee”) and the songs of Richard Tauber and Lawrence Tibbit. We were encouraged to sing the songs we were singing at school and, as we got older, the folk songs of the 60s. (Peter, Paul and Mary were big.)

The piano arrived in our house after my Grandmother's death in 1968, and from that time, the Christmas Eve sing-a-long became a tradition. Mum would begin by playing Christmas carols, but then the older songs would be played – G & S, Vera Lynn, the popular musicals of the 50s and 60s (My Fair Lady, South Pacific, Camelot). Mum and Dad would always do “The Girl that I Marry” and we all learnt the Whiffenpoof Song.

As the grandchildren grew they added their voices, and then their instruments. First a couple of guitars, then a few more. Bec could now play the piano, and Alex and Amanda added the clarinet and saxophone. New songs came with the guitars – especially The Beatles – and Mum especially loved Patrick's rendition of “Rawhide”.

Mum's last big Christmas Eve sing a long was in 2016, when there were about 20 people – children and grandchildren and in-laws outside under the stars, singing along to 5 guitars.

When she was admitted to a nursing home after a stroke, Mum could no longer watch TV but she could listen to music. We found recordings of many of the old songs she loved and played them constantly. We found a recording of "My Hero" and she sang along, remembering all the words. I have a little recording on my phone of her singing along to "Look for the Silver Lining" just two months before she died. It's almost unbearable to watch, but it expresses so much of who she was.

Dubbo Christmas Eve singing 2016.

