

# Musical Autobiographies - Repairing Self-Identity through Song

By Nick J Jones

Most musicians who have run singing groups in care homes have experienced that invigorating 'light bulb moment': a seemingly unresponsive person with dementia comes to life, suddenly able to sing and remember the words to a significant song from their past. This is tried and tested music therapy, with clear value. But what about new music? I've spent the past few years experimenting with composing bespoke, tailor made songs, about the individual and their life with people in care homes. At the heart of my practice lies the question of whether person-centred musical autobiographies can offset the most damaging impact of dementia: the loss of identity.

I first tried this with a friendly, but shy elderly lady with dementia called Maureen. I arranged with



Maureen's care home to meet with her for half-an-hour each week for six weeks with the aim of co-composing a song with her about her life. In many ways, Maureen seemed to be a typical dementia patient. She couldn't recall much about her life. When I gently enquired about snippets of information found in her file, her response was an inanimate 'oh, really?'. There were a few clues to work with. Her file mentioned the name of her old family home, Red Tiles, the fact her dad was a painter

(with some of his work hanging in Maureen's room), and that she enjoyed being in the garden in the summertime.

The next time I met Maureen I'd done some detective work. I managed to find photos of her old home from an estate agent's website and a picture of the woods by their house, painted by her father. I also brought along a soundscape of an English garden in the summer and the sound of crunching leaves whilst walking through the woods. The combination of visual and aural stimuli had a profound effect on Maureen. She was immediately responsive, as if transported to the past.

'It's very nice here isn't it?...where shall we go next?' she said. When I asked what she might be doing in the woods next to her house, she said fondly, 'walking the dogs with my two sons'. She recalled "just pottering around watching dad paint' in the garden'. I took the opportunity to play some gentle guitar chords and improvise a melody on the name of her old home, 'Red Tiles', which she enjoyed.

Each week I met with Maureen she usually began the sessions in a state of lethargic confusion, mostly forgetting what we'd done the previous week. However, singing 'Red Tiles' always seemed to evoke memories of her past. As these memories were put to music, over time, she was able to recall more and contribute to the composition of the song. There was little of the absent 'oh, really(s)?' once we got going. At one point I remember asking whether the song we'd written reminded her of home and she responded with an exuberant 'Yes! Of course it does!'. Staff members could see a greater sense of well-being in Maureen, noting that she seemed more relaxed, alert and social after our sessions.



Since first meeting Maureen in 2016, I have piloted this approach to musical dementia care at Rathmore House in Swiss Cottage. I've seen participants gradually opening up to new memories through sound, visual and musical stimulants and then being able to put these memories to music with my support. Witnessing profound transformations among residents, I feel certain that music provides a unique

ability to connect to the past and suspect that something about the creative agency in producing new music, could be healing for dementia sufferers.

The nostalgia these songs evoke seems to be instrumental in allowing dementia sufferers to access a lost part of themselves. These bespoke musical autobiographies package something of a 'self-identity boost' for participants and can become an important part of day-to-day care. Staff can play or sing these musical autobiographies as a form of validation therapy, reminding people of who they are, and stimulating opportunities to talk and bond. At Rathmore House, the residents' songs are kept on an Ipad and made into montages together with the nostalgic images used in the creative process. It has proven to be a valuable resource for staff and residents.

Studies have shown that music has the ability to 'bring people back to themselves' and that music can be a 'powerful cue' for stimulating autobiographical or personal memories in people with dementia' (Baird & Thompson, 2017). However, there has been less (if any) research into whether new and collaborative compositions can evoke similar, and perhaps even more powerful, responses. My hope is to team up with researchers who wish to study the nostalgic potential of new music to reveal how it might be used to help sufferers of dementia re-connect with their lost sense of self.

To listen to some of the songs written on this project please visit <https://soundcloud.com/carnivalvents/sets/nostalgitherapy-songs> And for more information on my work please visit [www.nickjjonesmusic.com](http://www.nickjjonesmusic.com)