

MAKING MUSIC PART OF YOUR LIFE

by Carl Reynolds

When I was eight, my dad bought me my first glove. Well, actually, he sold it to me. He felt I'd appreciate it more if I bought it. I paid \$2. He showed me how to use it in the backyard. When I was ten, I tried out for Little League. I started in the minors. The next year I joined the majors. Though I didn't play much that year, our team won the championship. I still have the trophy: "1967 Little League Champs." In high school I played second base and was a decent player. I thought about going out for the college team, but I decided to pursue other things. Others I knew kept climbing the ladder of baseball success. My roommate's brother went on to play second base for the Cleveland Indians.

I didn't know it at the time, but throughout my school years I was part of the baseball

farm team. A farm team is a system of recruitment. The idea is to create opportunities for people to learn an activity with a group of people at a similar skill level. The idea is that you can learn and grow and have a great time competing — and as your skill develops, there is always another team of people with the next level of skill. You go as far as your hard work and innate abilities will take you.

In the end, you have a lot of people that can play and enjoy the activity at some level. And eventually everyone appreciates people at all the different levels. Although I didn't go on to the big leagues, when I watch a baseball game I know how it feels to make a great play, I remember the camaraderie with my teammates and with my dad, and I can follow the strategy and art of the game.

That is what our church needs with music. How do we get every person in church and every new person that walks into church a \$2 mitt? Where is the backyard where we can just learn some of the basics? What would the Little League be, where things are a bit more organized, more skills are taught and there is a joining with others? How do you develop teams where people feel challenged to keep growing in their skills and appreciation for music?

CHAPTER ONEThe game:
How individuals can play

The greatest instrument ever made — do you know what it is? Perhaps a Stradivarius violin? A nine-foot Steinway grand piano? Maybe an old Marin D28 guitar? No, the greatest, most complicated, most beautiful, most versatile, most emotional, most unique instrument in the world is one every single person owns — the human voice. And it is free. It was thrown in when you were born. It grows rich with age. It matures with use and practice. And unlike a grand piano that is difficult to take with you backpacking, it goes with you anywhere, anytime. It can be used when you are all alone, or it can join with a friend, or two, or a thousand. How sad it is that we're not making the most of this special gift that God has given us. Most people are watching the "game" of music, but are not playing it.

How do you start playing the game? You sing. Sing in the shower. Sing in the car on the way to work (unless you car pool — then get permission). Sing while you work. Sing in church. Sing at parties. Sing at family gatherings. Sing when you mow the lawn, when you

*Ps. 134:14 -
I praise
you because
I am
fearfully +
wonderfully
made*

**Person singing
while walking
the dog**

make dinner, when you take the dog for a walk. The voice is an instrument the must be practiced. If you do not use it you will lose it.

What will you sing? Perhaps the first songs that jump to mind are favorites you've heard on the radio or from CDs. But the problem is that you can get dependent on the recording. You can only sing the song when you have some form of playback nearby, and so you never really learn the song and you never really learn how to sing. If you don't believe me, try this little experiment: Pick a song you have recently fallen in love with on the radio and try singing without the recording. Unless you are really good at music, my guess is it will not go well.

The best way to sing is to sing songs you know. But here is a problem. Many do not really know that many songs. Oh, we know a phrase here and there — maybe a verse or two if we don't get them mixed up. But how many songs, from beginning to end, do you know by heart? You see, the songs we know by heart are the ones we are going to sing in the shower, on a morning walk, and on any occasion that song comes upon us.

So my suggestion is to decide to really learn a few songs by heart, from top to bottom. Why not start with ten? And why not memorize five traditional hymns and five con-

temporary songs? If you like only traditional songs, this will be a good exercise in broadening your horizons. If you like only contemporary, this will be more helpful than you think — traditional songs are easier to sing without an instrument keeping the beat. I guarantee that if you memorize 10 songs you will automatically find yourself singing these songs sometime throughout your day without even thinking about it.

“OK,” you say, “but what if I can’t sing?” Well, how do you know that you can’t sing? Enjoying singing does not depend on the quality of your voice. Your voice is not bad, it just has character. In fact, the neat thing about music is that when you take a 100 lousy voices and put them together, it sounds like a pretty good choir.

“But,” you counter, “my problem isn’t the quality of my voice; it is a problem with pitch. I just can’t stay on pitch.” Personally, I believe a lot of people have this problem because they are so dependent on singing with recordings or with other people. The best way to sharpen your skills is to sing, not only with other people, but also on your own. And to sing often.

“You don’t understand,” you say, “I’m flat-out tone deaf.” Let me tell you something: There are very few really tone-deaf people, and you are probably not one of them. If you’re a

male, let me try to explain what may have happened to you. When we men are boys, we sing like girls — with a high voice. But about age 13, our voices start heading south. And when that happens, many guys lose their way. Technically speaking, what happens is boys are singing in the same octave as girls. But when their voices have fully changed, they are singing one octave lower than the girls. In the middle of the change some boys can't figure out which octave they should be singing in, so they start singing as low as they can. Soon that is all they sing — a few notes down low and they get labeled monotone (literally: one tone). After a few years, it gets ingrained and we declare them tone deaf.

It doesn't have to stay this way. Any music teacher could help. In fact, any person who knows how to sing at all may be able to help. For most people, all it takes is some education about octaves and scales, and then regular practice. Learning to carry a tune is a simple matter of effort, not talent.

So now you've memorized your ten songs and you are singing them at every chance. What's next? Why not learn harmony? Harmony adds depth and richness to the total experience of music — both in hearing it and in doing it. Harmony helps you experience music at many levels, and it also helps you experience

*This
happened
to my
brother
Thomas!*

*Rom 12:5 -
We belong to
each other
+ each of
us needs all
the others*

other people in a fun and exciting way.
Because harmony needs other voices.

Learning harmony might sound scary or confusing, but it is a really simple concept: The main part of a song is called the melody. This is the tune everyone is familiar with. Harmony is simply another song that goes along side it, either a few notes higher or a few notes lower than the main part. When you put the two songs together, you get a much richer sound. Harmony and the melody are together more than the parts. Something new is created.

New learners of harmony can get discouraged because they often lose the harmony part and start singing the melody. You have to remember that the melody is the most natural part to sing, and most likely you have burned those notes into your memory. It will take time to burn in the harmony part. But trust me — it will happen. And once it does, the next song you try to learn the harmony for will be easier.

Now, all this may sound somewhat complicated. Music can be. But it doesn't have to be. Most people can go a lot further with singing than they would ever dare to believe. I have seen it over and over. So at the very least, ask someone who seems more musical than you to mentor you a bit. Or join a choir. Or take music lessons — any money you spend will be well worth it.

We have been given this extraordinary instrument — the human voice — and it is a total waste not to develop it for our own pleasure, for others' pleasure, and most importantly for God's pleasure. And without working on it — without playing the game on our own — all we are doing is winging it every Sunday in church.

The human voice is our greatest instrument, but let me make a case for learning a conventional instrument as well. First of all, it's fun. It really is. And second, it is magical.

I remember being excited going into fourth grade: We were going to be introduced to our first instrument — the recorder. First the teacher taught us individual notes on our plastic flutes. I couldn't see how that would become music. How could individual notes put together make a continuous seamless stream? But it did. I was making music on a piece of plastic with holes.

Not only are instruments fun and magical, but they support your singing. First, an instrument added to your voice makes a bigger, fuller sound. The guitar strings or piano strings are actually adding harmony to the melody of your voice. It's something like being the lead singer in a choir. Second, an instrument makes

*Music in
every
member's
home?!!*

singing contemporary songs easier. In traditional music, the syllables come primarily on the downbeat, whereas in contemporary music they often come on the offbeat. You can succeed at singing hymns without an instrument because you can measure the downbeats quite easily in your head. But contemporary music is hard to sing without an instrument keeping a strong beat. That is its weakness; that is its strength. Because it works a lot better with instruments, contemporary music forces more people of the congregation to learn an instrument. And if you want music to happen at church and in every church member's home, someone in each family will have to learn an instrument. That is exactly what we want.

Which instrument should you learn? Any instrument you choose is a great choice. But for accompanying singing, I would recommend piano and guitar. Most instruments, like trumpet or flute, cannot be played while singing. Second, most instruments can only play one note at a time. If you are the only one playing, you tend to play the melody. The melody is what you sing. So there is no choir effect. With the piano and guitar, you can play and sing at the same time. Both also are capable of playing more than one note at the same time — thus are great for the choir effect.

The piano is one of the greatest instru-

ments ever invented. When it came into being, it threatened to put the symphony out of business because it could imitate the whole symphony. One drawback, however, is that it takes a lot of practice and time before you are able to accompany singing. But the effort and time is definitely worth it.

The guitar is probably the other great instrument. It is one of the easiest instruments to learn the basics of, so you can start to play and sing very quickly. If you were to learn just three chords (three different patterns of strings you push down with your fingers), I could teach you how to play 100 songs. Contemporary songs suit the guitar very well.

If you want to learn the piano, take lessons. If you want to learn the guitar, take lessons, or find someone who plays and ask for help getting started. With very little guidance you can be playing and singing in a month. The only thing standing in the way of you and music is a little effort. Just remember that the more you put into music, the more you'll get out of it.

Is this true?

Aren't you being a bit too optimistic?

CHAPTER TWO

The backyard:
How couples and families can play

Baseball has lost some of its luster since the days it was considered the national pas-time. Some people blame the big star salaries and even bigger egos. Some people blame the growth of distractions like TV, malls, or the internet. While these certainly play a part, the main reason baseball has suffered is because parents and kids don't play catch in the backyard like they used to. Families are no longer the center of the baseball world.

The trend now is to let the organized part of the baseball world do the training. Send your kid to Little League. Have him go out for the school team. But the power of baseball is not the game itself. The power of baseball is its ability to connect people to each other. The game is the excuse to come together.

Now, as a parent you might not be the best baseball teacher, and consequently your kid may not be learning the greatest baseball technique, but he will be connecting with you. That is what the game in the backyard, the game in your home, does — it connects your family to each other. Today, baseball unites

True

only baseball fans, but 50 years ago it united families, neighborhoods, communities — the country. That's the power of the backyard.

The same might be said about music: You could send your kids to school where they learn an instrument in band. Your child learns an instrument, but who does he connect with? His band teacher and band mates. And what happens when he graduates? The instrument more than likely goes into a closet never to be played again — after graduation, the venue for playing it is gone. The advantage of the family venue is it lasts a lifetime.

Family is where you live most of the time. The day-in, day-out activities you do as a family might not seem special when taken individually, but as a whole they have great power to shape and influence you. Yet we are losing all these little habits that help define us. We no longer play baseball together, we drive the kids around to four or five different sports. We no longer make music together, we each get our own headphones to listen to our own favorite style. Sadly, music is probably the number one item today that separates family members from each other.

That is the danger of recorded music versus live. Recorded music allows us each to escape into our own isolated world. With live music you need to come together to make it

*Maybe not
No. 1 - but
definitely a
problem*

happen. Instead of driving a wedge between family members, music could unite you as you work to create something that none of you could on your own. If you make your family the venue for playing music, for praising God, then those habits have a good chance of sticking for life. Music could become your family pastime.

Before you involve the kids — or if you are married and have no kids — you'll want to create a habit of music-making in your marriage. Any couple knows that your spouse is the closest living human being for you on the planet. Music is one of the most powerful connectors and memory-builders that there is. It is one of our chief means of praising God. And yet it goes unused, untapped in the average Christian marriage. How can this be?

Couples have a great advantage in learning music because two people learning something together have a greater chance of success than one. Take the steps you learned in the last chapter — sing, learn harmony, learn an instrument — and do them together. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 reminds us that "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up."

Though the potential for success is greater with two, there are some major obstacles to overcome. For instance, if you've never sung with your spouse, sitting down at the kitchen table and singing a hymn together might be a bit awkward. It's funny that we can be so self-conscious with the person we are the most intimate with. There's the fear of trying something new, for starters, but mostly it's uncomfortable because exposing your voice is so personal. But so is sleeping in the same bed. Somehow, married couples get over that embarrassment — through much repetition — and the same thing will happen with singing together.

Start out singing in the car with a tape. Then move to the house. Finally try it tape-free. With a little practice it will be no problem. Make it part of your marriage devotions.

Remember music is a powerful connecting force. Find a special song to mark your anniversary. Sing it together every year. When your children celebrate your 50th anniversary, and you (or they) sing your anniversary song, there will not be a dry eye in the place.

If one of you plays an instrument, this music thing together should be no problem. If neither of you play, why not both learn? Take lessons together. It will give you an excuse to be together — an excuse that could last the rest of your days together.

*Anyone
who wants
marriage
devotions
could
start at
"Wheres
Philip.com"*

The nurses, the doctors, and visitors were drawn to the room at the end of the hall. They said it was because of the love emanating from it. My wife's best friend's parents were dying — both in the hospital at the same time. And as their eight sons and daughters kept vigil over their last week on the earth, they sang. They sang songs they learned as children. They sang songs their parents had a lifetime of memories with. They sang songs they had sung together in church. But it wasn't the music that attracted the nurses, the doctors, and visitors to the room at the end of the hall, it was the love. That's what they said: "You can feel the love in that room." The music was just the means to express it.

That is what music does. It connects us, it communicates for us, and it joins us in emotional ways that would otherwise be awkward for most families. It allows us to say things to each other and God that we wouldn't otherwise have the emotional courage to say. It allows us to connect with our shared past without someone retelling all the shared past. It allows us to feel at a level we might otherwise run away from.

If you want love emanating from your hospital room one day, start laying the ground-

work now. Begin while the kids are young. Kids love to sing. They will sing regardless of whether you encourage them or not. They will sing whatever they listen to. They are sponges soaking up their environment. And they are not fussy about what they pick up. They will pick up songs from TV shows and commercials, from tapes and CDs, from what you the parents listen to, from what older brothers and sisters listen to.

Kids like songs because songs are repeatable. Kids like repeatable things. They will watch the same video over and over — I'm sure I've seen "Dumbo" a thousand times with my four boys. Children are looking for things they recognize because they are trying to make sense of the world, and so love repeated things. Songs fit the bill perfectly — they are made to be sung again and again.

If you want the music you teach your children to last a lifetime, it's important to attach particular songs to certain events. Take a look at Christmas music. It seems that every popular musician in the world has a Christmas album. Why is their popularity so strong? Because Christmas songs are only sung once a year and mark a very specific occasion. As the years go by, the memories that get attached to these songs get stronger and stronger. There is nothing magical about Christmas songs. You can

*Like David
did in the
Psalms*

They can also help you get family devotions at "Wheres Philip.com"

I need to sit down with my wife + have a brainstorm session on this

make the same thing happen with other events and other songs.

Attach songs to daily events: Pick out a bedtime song for each of your kids. Sing at the table — have a prayer and a song at every meal. When our kids were young we had each child pick out a song they wanted us to sing. They still remember those songs 15 years later. Sing before you begin your family devotions each day. Look at the daily habits your family already has and pick something that works best for you.

Attach songs to weekly events: Pick a song for your kids to sing when they get out of school for the weekend. Sing a certain song each week before church as preparation for worship. Singing during weekly chores can help lift some of the drudgery. Use your imagination.

Attach songs to monthly events: Try starting a monthly family talent show where everyone tries to do something with music. Celebrate the start of a new month with a song. Call your relatives once a month and sing a song about family on that day.

Attach songs to yearly events: Find a special song for the birth of each of your children. Have the congregation at your church sing it at the baptism. Sing that song on their birthday every year. That song will be special the rest of

their lives — and yours.

Choose a song to mark your yearly vacation. Before you head out of the driveway, have a family prayer and sing the family vacation or camping song. If you get together with other families for camping, have everyone sing it around a campfire.

Holidays are simple to attach a song to because they are already on your calendar. Make a New Years' Eve song part of your family tradition on the last day of the year. Sing it every year. For Easter, make the dough for hot crossed buns the night before — the crosses represent Christ's crucifixion. First thing on Easter Sunday put the buns in the oven, read the resurrection story in Luke 24, and sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today."

Christmas already has so many songs attached to it that you might feel you don't need to add anything. But what singing event is specifically related to your family? One day you will want your kids to come home for Christmas, but what special things will they come home for? Why not, on every Christmas Eve, light candles in a dark family room, read Luke 2 and sing "Silent Night"? Simple, easy, and any family can do it. Repeat this Christmas Eve event every year and watch your kids flock home for Christmas Eve when they are older, bringing with them friends, boy- and girl-

*And the
rising dough
represents
the rising
Savior?*

**Family singing
Silent Night
around candles**

friends, spouses, and kids. They'll want to share it with others.

Attach songs to one-time events: Mark significant changes in your family's life with a song. If you move, get a new job, or go to a new church, choose a song of celebration — or if it has you worrying, a song about trusting God and surrendering your fears.

You see what we are trying to do here: Create powerful bonds that connect memories and people and God. The collective layering of memories creates powerful relationship emotions. Music — and everything dealing with music — is an effective way to make this happen. Be creative: One unconventional approach I used was making a guitar. My son and I bought a guitar kit, which is all the wood and parts needed to put it together. It was quite a challenge — I am not Mr. Woodworking. But I went on the internet and downloaded all sorts of instructions and pictures from people who'd done this before. When we finally completed it, we began using the guitar in our family worship times. When my son leaves home, the guitar — with all his memories of worship, family, and dad — will go with him. Twenty years later, if his house were burning down, that memory-laden guitar would be the first thing he grabs.

Understatement

In many ways, the music game in the backyard is the hardest to get going and to maintain. You will probably run into a few brick walls before you can succeed. But keep going — it is also the most rewarding.

The first major wall to family music is parents who do not sing or play instruments and think it is because they are not gifted in it. If this is you, read the last chapter again. Besides, you do not have to be gifted in music to do family music. Even if you are one of the very few human beings who cannot sing no matter what, you can still create an environment for singing in your home. You just have to get things going, your kids will supply what you lack.

The second potential wall is thinking that you've already blown it because your kids are too old. But it doesn't matter. They may be 3, 10, 17, 30, or 45 years old — it is never too late to start playing the church-music game in your backyard. So your daughter is 30 and you failed to pick a hymn or contemporary Christian song to mark her birth. Pick one out now. At the next family gathering present it to her. Sing it with her on every succeeding birthday. If there is a great distance between you, sing it to her over the phone. It is never too late. Do something. Play. Sing. It is possible.

The third big wall is your kids becoming

teenagers. Music is easy when kids are younger. They love you; they love what you love. They freely express themselves with no worry as to how they sound. When they get older, they start developing a love for music that is different from yours — and many times, it's music you cannot stand. They become more self-conscious, and suddenly family singing isn't what it used to be.

Don't give up. Keep singing your annual songs; even if they appear uninterested on the outside, they'll recognize your interest in them still. For some of your other traditions, maybe it's time to let them pick the song. Give them some ownership of the process, and learn something about their interests. But most important, involve some other people their age, getting together to make music with other families and groups. You want to expand your game beyond the backyard and into the sandlot.

*Never
give up*