

“Do we need to reinvent the Wheel?”

LEYMN Apprentice, Ruby Barker reflects on LEYMN’s ‘Play Date’ Autumn 2014



BRIEFING PAPER

The “Not the Wheels On Bus, Again” title of LEYMN’s Play Date suggests slightly provocatively¹ that there is something a bit tired and boring about the more populist Early Years repertoire².

Perhaps there is some truth in this but in the case of “Wheels On The Bus” I feel a little protective. I actually like it. It’s a fun song, with a simple repetitive melody, lots of verses and easy sounds and actions.

Yes, some of the verses are outdated, “the mummies on the bus go natter, natter, natter” for example, is not exactly establishing positive gender stereotypes, but there is something important about some of the repertoire you use being familiar and fun, particularly I think, for drop-in sessions which have a floating group of regulars and one or two new participants every week.



Although it would be unwise to assume that all “popular Early Years songs’ are familiar to our participants. Many parents do remember “Wheels On The Bus” from their childhood and babies and kids really like it and this in itself gives it value. As Sue Nicholls says in her introduction to her music book Bobby Shaftoe:

“...new melodies can be difficult to pick up if you are not a fluent music reader...this book offers a wealth of new material using the melodies you already know and can confidently sing with your children”³.

For me, Nicholls makes a crucial observation about parents being able to “confidently sing with (their) children” highlights the positive role, popular Early Years repertoire can have within our Early Years sessions. A quick appraisal of Early Years music literature of the past 30 years suggests that a lot of the new material takes traditional nursery rhyme tunes and adds new words for this reason.

¹ This was an intention of Sound Connections in order to give the event a title that would catch people’s attention and encourage a reaction.

² According to Wikipedia Wheels On The Bus originated in US, around 1939

³ Introduction Bobby Shaftoe, Clap Your Hands, Sue Nicholls, A&C Black 1992

For those parents who aren't familiar with this popular repertoire, possibly because they were born outside the UK, songs like Wheels On The Bus still appear to be appreciated and liked. Perhaps this is just because songs are widely enjoyed by babies and kids but it is possible that singing well known in the English canon of popular kids songs may also have some value in helping to strengthen English language skills and a kind of acculturation in preparation for school. Who knows, I have no strong evidence for this either way, other than my own experience of running a free Song & Rhyme time session in an east London Library. What I found with the Library group, a bit to my surprise, was that popular and adapted repertoire was really well received. And this is from a group of parents and under 5s, which spoke over nine different mother tongue languages. A fact I found out not from a questionnaire but from singing "Hello Around The World" ⁴ a song based on the popular tune "If You're Happy and You Know It" and asking the parents to shout out the word for "Hello" in their given language. I remember too when one of the mums, Mauritian by birth, who offered us a "Bonzour" Hello and also said to me, "Hey you should sing one for English too" which of course we did.



My main reason for asking the question "Do we need to reinvent the Wheel" is not to defend popular repertoire to the exclusion of newer, self-penned or culturally diverse material but to open up a discussion about our creativity as practitioners and our approach and delivery of music in an Early Years context. Also we should be mindful that cultural references are not only delivered through the type of repertoire you use but how you use it. Popular music, rhythms and styles should not be neglected.

Yes, we must think about why we choose the material we use and to reappraise this regularly. But for me the most important question with respect to Early Years repertoire is what we, and our participant's, DO with the songs and this in my opinion is down to our shared creativity. Taking a creative approach to popular and new or less familiar material has a real value.

My approach draws on my experience as a singer, motherhood, my love of Jazz and contemporary music and the training I received through LEYMN. I dreamed up this fusion of jazz/contemporary music vibe with Early Years after I finished my 6 months volunteering and was thinking "what can I offer that is different, of value and that I will enjoy?". Funnily enough when I mentioned this crazy idea to a very worldly bass player I

⁴ Bingo Lingo, Helen MacGregor A&C Blacks 1999

was traveling to a gig with and he said that's a great idea - you have to check out the excellent US based Baby Loves Jazz, version of "Wheels On The Bus". When I did, I knew it would work and was something I could do in my own style⁵.

My BabyJazz classes use live musicians, percussion instruments, my voice – and a variety of accompanists, my favourite being beat-boxer, DavidX- to bring children's songs, jazz standards and early years repertoire to life for babies, young children and their parents or carers. The jazzed-up songs in these personal and fun weekly sessions span everything from "It Don't Mean A Thing" to "Incy Wincy Spider", and the self-penned "The Alphabet Bop" to the spiritual "The Train is A Coming". The sessions include scarves and puppets and follow a format familiar with many Early Years sessions, including Welcome and Goodbye songs, free form percussion and Active and Listening parts to encourage babies and children and parents to explore sounds, rhythm and words in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. I find that adding another instrument, I do not play an instrument myself,



really enhances the musical soundscape, the musical interplay and the potential for improvisation. To date I have worked with Beatboxer, Double Bass, Guitarist, Flutist, Pianist and Sax.

I draw material from jazz standards, populist tunes, nursery rhymes and adapted populist tunes like Linda Bance's

"Butterfly, Butterfly/Hush-A-Bye Baby". It's not my aim for the session to become a "Ruby show" but it is important to me that I enjoy the music and bring my own spin so that the songs evolve and change with each new musician and session. I enjoy playing with the music, breathing life into the songs, and hopefully everyone else will enjoy them too. I recently conducted my second questionnaire with parents and I know that the songs are enjoyed being sung at home.

Clearly your creative approach is determined by where your skills lie as a practitioner, your influences, your experience, education and what you want to do. I say be as musical as you can and encourage natural musicality amongst your participants. Don't over complicate or equally dumb down. Think about the structure of the session and what songs/music works where and why. Think about your audience/participants and their experience. If you don't know ask and find out.

⁵ Baby Loves Jazz Greatest Hits disc 1, 2007 Baby Loves Everything LLC

Finally I think we should remember as practitioners that familiarity/popularist doesn't have to mean mundane. It's what we do with the material that counts. Yes, the repertoire you chose is important but if you don't deliver it creatively then it gets boring and tired and you will too!

References

- Music For Early Learning, Linda Bance, Routledge 2012
Playsongs Sheena Roberts, Playsongs Publications Ltd, 1987
Bobby Shaftoe, Clap Your Hands, Sue Nicholls, A&C Black 1992
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Baby Loves Jazz Greatest Hits disc 1, 2007 Baby Loves Everything LLC

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