



Documentary Songwriters – Five Signs of Impact

Every life has a story.

Every story deserves a voice.

Connecting with others is paramount to health. New research affirms this; social isolation causes higher stress levels, sleep disruption, inflammation, and immune system alteration.¹

¹ Dhruv Khullar, “How Social Isolation Is Killing Us,” *The New York Times* (December 22, 2016), accessed June 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/22/upshot/how-social-isolation-is-killing-us.html>

Moreover, in the United States and across the globe, we are divided by political, racial, and socioeconomic boundaries, and loneliness is recognized as a public health epidemic. While we may be continuously connected digitally, isolation seems to be increasing.²

² Victor Murthy, “Work and the Loneliness Epidemic,” *Harvard Business Review* (September, 2017), accessed June 22, 2018, <https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>

People around the world love music, regardless of their heritage. With its documented ability to mend wounds and bridge gaps, song is a powerful vehicle for self-expression and healing. A recorded song can cross great distances and create a connection between people who have never met in person.

Our organization – Documentary Songwriters – believes that personal stories and music combined together can transcend boundaries and overcome emotional isolation. These songs, the voices of individuals, add to the fabric of our villages and cities; they hold our past, our present, and our future. If these voices rise, we all win.



Documentary Songwriters honor people by creating music with them.

Workshop participants follow a proven, step-by-step creative process that was originated by Malcolm Brooks, PhD, of Maine in 2009. This process became his dissertation topic for Prescott College.

The documentary songwriting process has now been in circulation for five years. It has been tested in the U.S., Canada, Spain, Cuba, and, most recently, amidst conflicts on the island of Cyprus.

Participants in documentary songwriting workshop witness, first-hand, the creative benefits of drawing from diverse backgrounds and outlying points of view. They see how sharing differences can stir bravery and strength. They work together toward a common goal and experience the productive power that comes from group focus and alignment of purpose.



Workshops of Creativity and Collaboration

In documentary songwriting, musicians trained in the process are known as teaching artists. Teaching artists lead individual songwriting sessions, as well as group workshops at schools, community centers and other settings.

In a safe, supportive environment, documentary songs may serve to release thoughts and feelings that have been previously unshared.

Additionally, the documentary songwriting process allocates time for deep listening, for reflecting, and for allowing ideas to arise. This dedicated time can often be hard to find elsewhere in the participants' lives.

Our Impact

In the following pages we will look at the current impact of documentary songs. Our data is qualitative, but we believe they accurately represent our effect on the communities we work with.

We make a difference in these ways:

1. Providing a safe, supportive environment
2. Demystifying creativity
3. Fostering self-confidence
4. Strengthening communities
5. Reaching across cultures

A sample workshop outline:

1. Session 1: *Demonstration* – Introduction to the mission, group demonstration of creating a song with one volunteer from the group
2. Session 2: *Collaboration* – Small-group practice of sharing oral histories and generating lyrics and melodic motifs
3. Session 3: *Refining* – Sharing of small-group lyric and melodic sketches, selecting which songs to refine and perform
4. Session 4: *Celebration* – Reflection on the creative experience and sharing of original songs that were created

Evaluations confirm that the help is real.

We strive to provide the best possible experience for participants and have designed our evaluation process to help us achieve that goal.

In surveys and in conversations after workshops, participants often express feelings of empowerment and new confidence. They also express gratitude for learning more about their community. One participant wrote, “We’re all a lot more delicate and human than we let people think.”

After a workshop at the White Mountain School in New Hampshire, 37 eleventh grade students completed the post-workshop evaluation. Thirty-five of them, or 95%, rated their experience as excellent or good. 28 of them said they would like to continue documentary songwriting.

Our Methods

We gather qualitative data from workshops and individual sessions in these ways:

1. Evaluations completed by participants post-workshop
2. Comments collected in guest books at performances and online
3. Lyrics from the songs themselves

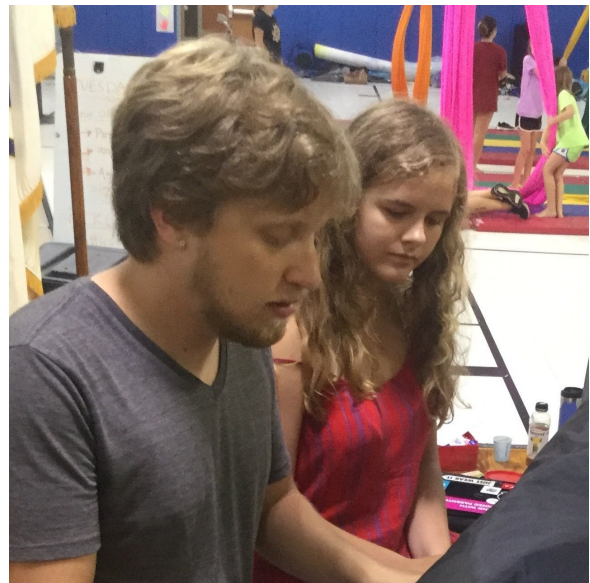
– A comment from a professor of education: “If every person could be so deeply honored through their education in this way...dreams would start taking shape everywhere.”

Through collecting this qualitative data, we improve our method and continue to empower individuals and share in community-based music. Our research points to five ways in which documentary songwriting makes a difference: providing a safe, supportive environment, fostering self-confidence, demystifying creativity, strengthening communities, and reaching across cultures. We will explore these impacts in the pages that follow.

The Five Signs of Impact

Evaluations from documentary songwriting workshops show that participants feel supported, empowered, and are often awed by their peers and their own creativity.

These positive connections create a sense of belonging and form support networks – critical steps to tackling the current epidemic of isolation.³ The next few pages supply qualitative data examples, as well as a rigorous analysis of the songs themselves.



³ Clay Routledge, “Suicides Have Increased. Is This an Existential Crisis?,” *The New York Times* (June 24, 2018), accessed June 24, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/opinion/sunday/suicide-rate-existential-crisis.html>

1. Providing a Safe and Supportive Environment

One key aspect of the documentary songwriting method is providing a space where participants feel safe and comfortable expressing their innermost thoughts and feelings. This space is created by encouraging everyone to be present.

Cell phones are turned off, and participants are coached on the practice of listening deeply without judgement. Support of this type is difficult to find in the outside world, and participants notice the difference:

- “I felt like I bonded with my group and met some pretty awesome people.”
- “Don’t be afraid to sing because you always have someone supporting you.”
- “I learned about what they [my peers] value through their telling of stories.”
- “It got many people to open up their minds through stories, allowing us to get to know each other better.”

- “I’m proud of all the support by my peers.”

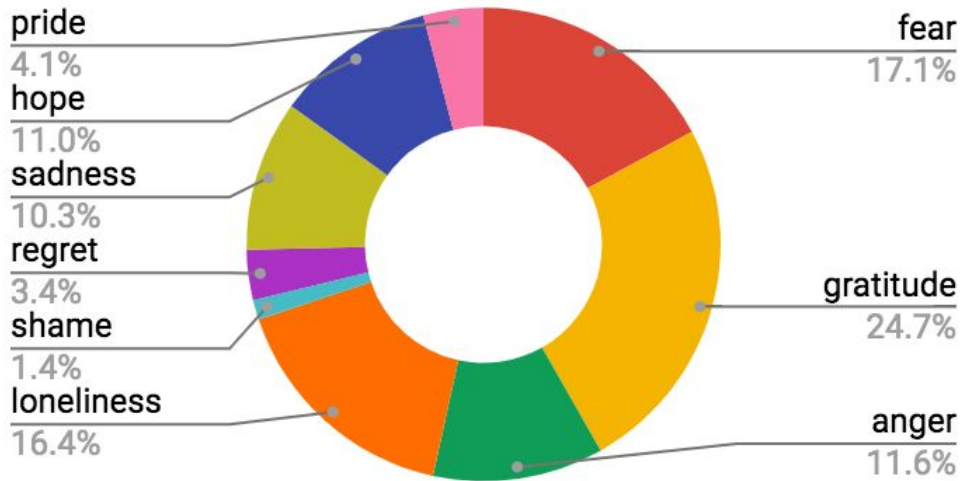


2. Fostering Self-Confidence

In a safe and supportive environment, participants feel more comfortable expressing themselves and their own vulnerability.

Following the documentary songwriting method, participants share emotional stories and also sing in front of others. Most people have difficulties with these steps, but soon realize that everyone has the same fears of expressing feelings. Overcoming these fears can lead to a wide range of emotional expression.

Emotions Expressed through Documentary Songs



When participants witness how they have created a song that expresses their own felt emotion, they may feel a sense of confidence. They are speaking through a new, musical voice.

- “Really, I’m proud of the whole thing because I got to take something in my head and make it into music.”

- “Seeing what I thought of as a song with little potential become a really good piece of work.”
- “I always felt comfortable even when I was being pushed a bit past my usual zone.”
- “I learned that being nervous and sometimes vulnerable isn’t a bad thing.”

3. Demystifying Creativity

The step-by-step songwriting process that defines the documentary songwriting method allows anyone to write a song, regardless of whether or not they think of themselves as creative.

A truly collaborative effort, documentary songwriting ensures that the participant is always supported and their emotions valued.

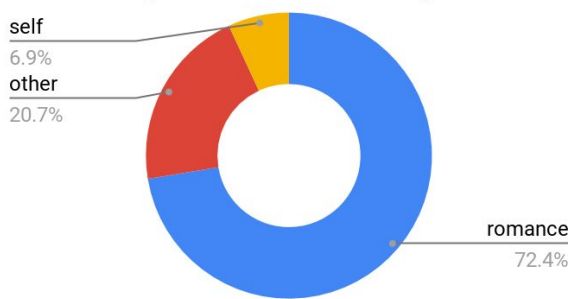
- “I never thought I could write a song”
- “Seeing what I thought of as a song with little potential become a really good piece of work”
- “Creating something and making it real”
- “I am proud of coming up with a story that I could turn into a song.”
- “This was an opportunity to explore part of myself that I didn’t even know existed.”
- “It has become a way for me to fully understand certain aspects of my life.”

A process that demystifies creativity enables people from all walks of life to write songs.

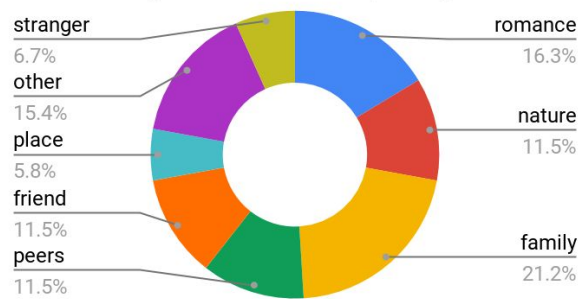
Because we are helping all people, not solely professionals, to write songs, topics may emerge that stretch beyond what is often heard on commercial radio.

To illustrate, a 2011 analysis of 1000 Billboard number one hits found that over 70% of the songs were about a romantic partner. Yet, in contrast, *only* 16% of 110 documentary songs surveyed concern romance. The rest deal with family, nature, peers, friends, strangers, places, and other relationships

Relationships in Commercial Songs



Relationships in Documentary Songs

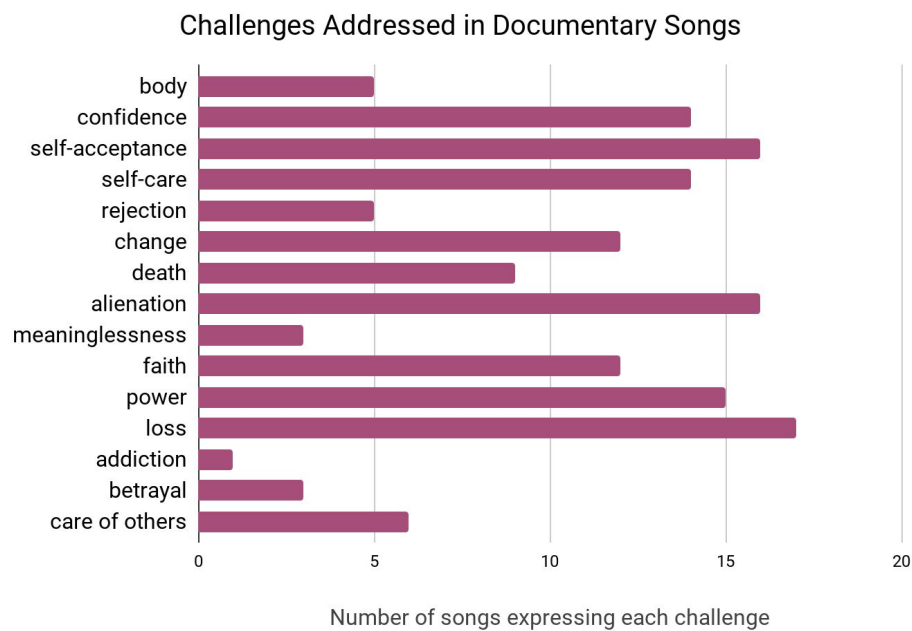


Through the simplicity of our process, Documentary Songwriters invites and amplifies a broad range of voices and experiences.

4. Strengthening Communities

When people express the challenges they're facing, and other people hear about those challenges, they may find that they experience those challenges, too.

A community grows stronger the more it knows about itself. Documentary songs enable people to share, through music, some of the challenges they face.



The lyrics from participants' spoken words can also counteract factionalism and cultural misconceptions and affirm that differences may actually define a community. An example:

“My house was between
A church and a mosque
Sharing each other's
Joy and sorrow
Every moment”⁴

Another example is from a farmer in upstate New York. She recounts her experiences of how her community finds strength to overcome any obstacle. The chorus of her song reads:

“But now, as the whole world
falls apart,
As the whole world falls apart,
We band together, keep each
other going,
Side by side.
We band together, keep each
other going
To survive.”⁵



A songwriting session with a single volunteer may give rise to shared emotions that may have not been previously expressed. One island community in Maine discovered that they had all traveled in search of a place where they felt they belonged.

“It's not easy to be here
To get here to live here
This is where we are
The mailman and the teacher.”⁶

You can hear recordings of documentary songs here:

docsong.org

⁴ Androulla Shati and Melodi Var Öngel, “Suli and I” *Documentary Songwriters* (2018), accessed June 24, 2018, <https://docsong.org/blog/2018/04/29/suli-and-i/>

⁵ Catherine Bennett and William Foote, “We Band Together,” *Documentary Songwriters* (2018), accessed July

14, 2018, <http://docsong.org/blog/2017/06/11/cat-bennet/>

⁶ Michael McFarland, William Foote, Eleanora Willlauer, and Alexander Wilder, “The Mailman and the Teacher” unpublished transcript, 2017.

5. Reaching Across Cultures

We reach people through our collaborative workshops, performances, and recordings. As a result, the work of Documentary Songwriters is expanding across the globe.



Participants have come from the following nations:

- Turkey
- Cyprus
- Australia
- The Netherlands
- Spain
- U.S.
- China
- Mexico
- Cuba

Age Range

- Youngest: 9 years (a gymnast competing in his first public meet)
- Oldest: 96 years (a former prisoner in World War II)

To overcome geographic hurdles, we select songs to record professionally and distribute through streaming services such as Spotify. We strive to create connections between participants and listeners who may live at great distances from one another.



Each time a connection is felt through a documentary song, an individual listener, somewhere, may feel less alone. As one listener emailed,

“I am in a rough place right now, and your music is helping me get through it.”⁷

Documentary Songwriters – Who We Are



Nora Willauer's thesis on cello arranging for documentary songwriting has earned a place in the University of Oregon Library's permanent collection. Nora studies at the Cleveland Institute of Music and leads the #MeToo DocSong project for women who have survived sexual abuse. She would also like to write documentary songs with adolescent women who have struggled with eating disorders.



Melodi Var Öngel is the recipient of the Davis for Peace Project grant, which funds her documentary songwriting project on Cyprus. She lives in Adana, Turkey, and travels to work with people who live in conflict zones and who have limited interaction. She is enrolled as a graduate student at the London School of Economics. Her goal is to use music as a way to increase communication and to construct alternative futures.



Joaquin Contreras focuses on writing documentary songs with families and communities in order to help them preserve their histories and cultures. He attends Bennington College, where he works with a student-led organization called Ganas, focusing on providing support to Latinx migrant workers in the greater southern Vermont area.

⁷ Personal email, “Thank You,” received May 23, 2018



Malcolm Brooks, PhD, is a composer and faculty member of Bay Chamber Concerts and Music School. His work is heard on PBS, NOVA and the History Channel. He has written music for films that have won honors, including two Emmy nominations and a Peabody award. Malcolm is interested in writing documentary songs with people who have lost loved ones, people in recovery from addiction, and students of all ages.



Will Foote organized the first ever concert of documentary songs at a university folk festival. He has traveled to remote regions in upstate New York to document in music the emotions and experiences of contemporary farmers. He is a graduate of St. Lawrence University and leads the Veterans' DocSong Project. He also wants to write documentary songs with people who have learning differences, as well as people who feel alienated in their communities.



Alex Wilder has produced recordings for the Push Farther Project, Chloë Isis, Mostly Brothers, and Hazel Delehey. He has led sessions in documentary songwriting, both in English and Spanish, in the U.S., Cuba, and Spain. He is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Oberlin College. Alex would like to help people express their difficulties and share their coping mechanisms with those in similar situations.



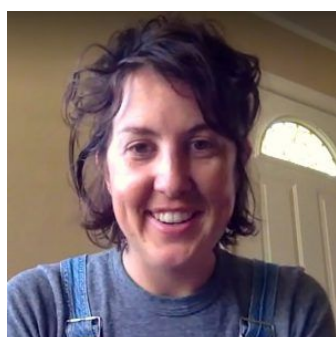
Mimi Bornstein serves as Director of Music Ministries at Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia. She is the founder of the 100+ singer Midcoast Community Chorus, which raises money through yearly concerts and then donates the proceeds to causes in Maine. She is interested in writing documentary songs with people who have suffered from domestic abuse.



Zach Arfa has pioneered documentary songwriting in summer musicals and in camps addressing addiction and mental or health challenges. He attends Oberlin College where he is majoring in psychology and dance. Zach believes that it may be healing for individuals to be listened to openly, without judgment, as in documentary songwriting. He is interested in exploring the connection of that relationship and a therapeutic one.



Hazel Delehey pioneered the first documentary song for a documentary film for the High Mountain Institute in Colorado. Hazel serves as lead vocalist for the #MeToo DocSong project. She is also interested in writing songs with people who look to nature to guide them through struggle.



Caroline Rex-Waller pioneered the first-ever documentary songwriting workshop in a high school. She directs the curriculum design project for Documentary Songwriters and teaches at Open School East in Portland, Oregon. She graduated from Smith College and is currently enrolled in a long-distance Master's program at Middlebury.



Tori Arau heads up the podcast project for Documentary Songwriters. Tori is the recipient of a 2018 research position in analytical chemistry at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. She is interested in writing documentary songs with women who have struggled with chronic health disorders.



Chloë Isis composed and recorded with the Bay Chamber-Carnegie Hall Lullaby Project in 2018, and conducted the first-ever live documentary songwriting session on radio. She is interested in writing documentary songs with people who are deaf, children, and people who are processing grief.



Chris Finn has sung and played in churches since childhood, spending 13 years leading a Los Angeles based contemporary music church band. Chris currently plays guitar in an 18-piece jazz orchestra and assorted combos as well as serving as a supporting church musician in Maine.



Ken Goldman started out in classical music studies at Northwestern University's School of Music and then turned to the drum set. He has studied with Hamid Drake and Mark Walker and has performed at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival with Tony Furtado and Matt Flinger and at CBGB with Peter Stuart. Currently, he drums in the jazz trio Katz and Dogs, the soul/jive band Dizzy Hat, and the power pop band Good Mitten.



Jonny Westhorp is a guitarist and documentary songwriter from Manchester, England, living and working in Belgium. He holds popular and jazz music degrees from the University of Salford, UK, and the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp, Belgium. He is currently studying for his masters in Jazz guitar. Having trained in community music with Musicians Without Borders, Jonny is interested in using music as a way of uniting and integrating marginalised members of society into the community.

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