

SONGWRITING ON QUEEN MARY 2

by

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On a transatlantic voyage, there are no port days to break up the voyage and entertain the guests. Consequently, the success of the voyage is very much dependent on what happens inside the ship. In this day and age, traditional cruise ship activities are not enough to satisfy guests during seven days at sea. Thus, for Queen Mary 2, the only ocean liner making regularly scheduled transatlantic crossings, it is imperative to develop new and innovative programming that serves to enliven and enhance the ship's abundant physical attractions.

One such program, which debuted during the 2011 season, is the Queen Mary 2 Songwriting Voyages. Developed by Chris Difford, award-winning songwriter and co-founder of the highly successful British band Squeeze, the program offers guests the opportunity to participate in writing, recording and performing songs that they create onboard. "What we are trying to do more and more is [to have] more interaction where guests are not just sitting listening to a lecture [but] get

more involved. The Songwriters Voyages, which we started this season on the transatlantic, have been greatly successful," commented Paul O'Loughlin, Entertainment Director on QM2.

"The reason why it works is Chris Difford. He is such a caring individual and he cares so much about people and their stories and people expressing their stories. He is the catalyst that makes it work."

Mr. Difford has been conducting songwriting workshops on land for some 18 years. "I started years ago just trying to find a way of giving back something of what the music industry has given me. I have never made any money out of it. It is just something that I liked. Normally, they just involve artists writing songs for themselves or for other artists," he explained. However, the idea of working with non-professionals at sea intrigued him. "Although it is not writing for other people, it is writing for the clients who come onboard the ship, a slightly different delivery. So I just thought I would give it a go and see what happens."

Working with Difford is a team of "mentors," each of whom is a professional musician, songwriter and/or recording artist. Just as importantly, each is a people person, friendly and interested in interacting with the guests.

The program begins with an introductory session during which Difford outlines the program. In the first three songwriting voyages, the number of guests participating ranged from 50 to 100. However, on each voyage, the program quickly became the talk of the ship and so it can be said that it touched many more guests.

A quite astonishing diversity of guests have shown interest in the program. Participants have ranged in age from children to seniors. Nationalities have included Americans, Australians, Europeans and, of course on a British ship, people from the United Kingdom

Along the same lines, participants have included guests with no musical experience as well as guests with degrees in music. "A lot of guests are musicians, pianists, guitarists. The talent amongst are guests blew Chris Difford away," O'Loughlin pointed out .

Following the introductory session, guests who decide to participate are assigned to groups. One or more mentors are assigned to each group. The groups then meet twice a day to work on their songs. Although only scheduled for an hour, these sessions frequently last longer as the guests' enthusiasm snowballs.

The fact that a transatlantic voyage involves seven days at sea is vital to the success of the songwriting program. "It would not work in the Mediterranean where everyone is getting off every day because the [guests would lose] concentration," Difford explained.

During the sessions, the mentors do not give lectures on how to write a song. Rather, they act as facilitators, making suggestions and giving encouragement. There is no negative criticism. No one is told that their talents would be better suited to the shuffleboard competition. As a result, even those guests who have no experience or who have not played a note in years are made to feel that they are part of the group and should contribute.

Almost magically, a song emerges from these group sessions as the various participants contribute portions of lyrics and pieces of the music. At the same time, a bonding occurs. In part, this is attributable to the fact that passengers on a ship are typically more open than when they are on land. However, it is also due to the fact that these people are joined together in a creative pursuit that necessarily involves letting ones guard down and revealing more of their inner self.



Chris Difford

The mentors also interact with the guests on an individual basis. Husband and wife Matt and Clare Deighton were the mentors for my group. She is an operatically trained singer who has performed as a session singer and in her own one-woman show. He has six studio albums to his credit and stood in for Noel Gallagher in Oasis on tour in 2000. Both followed-up on the interests expressed by the individual group members. Indeed, Matt sacrificed his lunch hour one day to give me a demonstration of how he writes songs.

Guitar-playing guests can borrow one of the Fender acoustic guitars that Cunard has purchased for the program. Keyboards and other instruments are also available for use by the participants. "Cunard has been very supportive. They have bought guitars and instruments, made rooms available. So there is no shortage of support from Cunard."

To provide a goal for the songwriting process, each group is given the opportunity to record their song and then to perform it live in QM2's Royal Court Theatre near the end of the voyage. The recording sessions are done in one of the rooms used when disem-

barking passengers into the ship's tenders. However, the recording sessions are overseen by a professional record producer and the equipment allows for overdubbing of guitar solos and of vocal harmonies. It produces a reasonable recording and more importantly, it gives the guests a feel of what it is like to record a song.

The live performance is a more elaborate affair. Not only do the friends and traveling companions of the performers attend but also many guests who are curious to find out what all the talk has been about for the last week. Indeed, O'Loughlin noted that on one voyage, the lead singer of The Who, "Roger Daltry, came and sat through the whole thing and applauded with everyone".

It can be a daunting prospect to stand in front of approximately 1,000 people and perform. "There have been a few bits of stage fright but once people get up there suddenly they become like Elvis Presley. We are all geared to be like Elvis Presley at some point in our lives. It is quite good fun really," Difford confided.

In fact, giving people the opportunity to step outside of their normal existence is one of the objectives of the program. "What I hope people get out of it is something spiritually uplifting to take away. Most of the people have only dabbled in songwriting at best. It is something new for them to do."

"I think quite a few people have a hidden desire to be a guitar player or wonder what would it have been

like if I had done this instead of being the manager of a local bank. Everybody reaches a stage in their life when they think 'what if.' This is kind of a 'what if' process, which is an expression of self. That is what I mean by the spiritual uplift. It takes them out of where they normally are," Difford explained.

The program lends itself to spiritual healing in another way as well. "People [have written] about family members, loved-ones who have passed away and that is therapeutic. You can write thoughtful songs, loving songs, songs with messages - - those are all spiritual journeys in themselves."

Indeed, O'Loughlin gave an example of one such journey: "We had a lovely story where there was a father and daughter who had not been getting on and their relationship was very strained. They came onboard to try and improve their relationship. They ended up getting involved in the songwriting program, writing a song together, performing a song together and that relationship was mended because of this."

In addition to the songwriting program, during the voyage Mr. Difford appears on stage to give a presentation about his experiences in the music industry. In the evenings, the mentors perform concerts in the ship's pub and for the ship's crew.

There is no additional charge for the songwriting program or for the use of the musical instruments.



The songwriting mentors performing in QM2's Golden Lion Pub