

Join in the singalong sessions that will put a smile on your face

by Phil Creighton Tuesday, June 23, 2020 6:00 am 0



Basil Brush is one of the special guests in the Smiling Sessions

THE whole world knows that when you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you.

And for a collective of passionate musicians, they know that what the world needs right now is love, sweet love. And possibly some Que Sera Sera.

Singing is a great unifier that puts a smile on people's faces and in these lockdown times, that's needed more than ever.

The coronavirus has seen all musicians unable to perform publicly. Some have performed on doorsteps, some have made Zoom videos and others, well, they want to spread some sunshine in their lives.

Alison Jones launched The Smiling Sessions back in 2012. It's aimed at bringing people who live in sheltered and managed homes together through the power of music. They've been visiting residents to sing everything from Bing Crosby to Elvis Presley, encouraging them to join in, and take their requests.

It's a great initiative that taps into music's abilities to bring people together, improve their health and get them dancing and playing instruments.



But with care homes not open to visitors, their regular sessions have been put on hold. In response, Alison has done something really special: a weekly singalong video featuring some of the biggest names in music and comedy.

Guests have included La Voix, Rod Argent from The Zombies, actor Derek Riddell, Jay Aston and Cheryl Baker from Bucks Fizz, comedian Lucy Porter, singer Daniel O'Donnell and the legendary Basil Brush.

Together with Pete Balkie and Neil Herd, Alison and her guests lead a subtitled singalong. It could be anything from Que Sera Sera, Sweet Caroline and What a Wonderful World.

And it's all compiled remotely.



"After two weeks of shock at the closures, and coming to terms with all of our work being at a standstill, we came up with the idea," Alison says. "I'm not technical, but my team are, we had a chat about how to make it work.

"We've had to learn new skills and buy some new equipment, we've learned some tricks and it's happening. It's a lot of work, and very time consuming, but we've had a great reception."

Alison has had an extensive career, and is used to performing at festivals such as Womad and Isle of Wight, but this is something different.

"We just love it," she says. "We've the excitement of playing and the unexpected excitement of attracting celebrities. It adds a whole new dimension. It's fantastic."

When they are making the music, Alison on her violin and accompanying the guest singer, "I don't think of it as performing to a computer screen, I think of the people receiving it, in their homes and rooms, and touching their hearts."

She admits that it has not been easy to perform remotely, but does think that it's worth it.

"Music is so complex in how it affects people," she explains.

"Singing is a unifier, it's a group thing, it brings out feel-good emotions, music makes us feel good. It's good for the lungs, blood pressure and stress, singing is really good for you."

And there's more: "Singing triggers incredible memories, and singing together brings a sense of community, it helps connect the lonely."

Launching The Smiling Sessions online has also brought home just how isolated some people have been during the lockdown.

Alison says that some of the people she wants to reach have been stuck in their rooms and unable to get out, and don't have access to the internet or phones that enable them to have video calls or catch-up on online television.

"It's quite shocking that people haven't had that connection that some people take for granted," she says.

The result is that she has launched a fundraising campaign to purchase ipads and tablet computers so that residents in care homes can tune in to the Smile Sessions.

"The appeal is really starting to pick up," Alison says. "Donations have been brilliant."

And she is hoping that the app they are creating will make it easier for homes to allow their residents to tap into the songs, even if they don't have a wifi connection in their rooms.



The Smiling Sessions is perfect for care homes

It's important, because it will be some time before care homes will be able to accept visitors.

"I'll be very surprised if we can go into them before the autumn, it could even be Christmas," Alison says. "I suspect we'll be the last groups to return. We'd rather keep people safe as possible.

"It will be a while before we can have face-to-face performances, but we can still have music."

But even when life is back to normal, Alison is excited about the possibilities that have been opened to her: "This has got legs in a way I never imagined.

"We can reach out to more people than we did previously, we can reach them anywhere in the world. We've started in England, then Scotland and Wales, and Australia.

"I'm really excited by it."

And, as she has sung, it's a wonderful world.

To watch the videos, search for **The Smiling Remotely Weekly Singalong Sessions** on YouTube, they are by Shapeshifter Productions.

To donate click here: <https://localgiving.org/appeal/smilingremotely/>

And any staff at a care home or isolating wishing to join in the weekly singalongs can contact: smiling@shapeshifter-productions.com