



_PHOTOS: KIM HUGHES/THE GRID

Tom Hocking plays for residents of Toronto's Heritage Nursing Home.
TUE JAN 22, 2013

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MUSIC

Nursing home confidential

Nightclubs and concert venues aren't the only places aspiring and established performers ply their trade. We take a look inside the surprisingly rich and varied seniors' entertainment circuit.

BY: KIM HUGHES

Not many concerts reach their apex at 11 a.m. on a Thursday morning. But here at the Heritage Nursing Home in Toronto's east end, singer/pianist Tom Hocking has the crowd in a relative lather. Maracas, a tambourine and a rubber chicken are being merrily shaken, hands are clapping and voices are singing along.

Sure, about half of the 40-strong crowd is either sound asleep or otherwise tucked deeply in their own worlds, but for those hanging onto every lyric of "Hey Good Lookin,'" "Home on the Range" and "Take Me Home, Country Roads" this is entertainment supreme.

Few of us ever visit nursing homes; fewer still stop to think about what goes on there and what our future lives inside one (gulp) might look like. Some aspects of the experience seem grim. But the live entertainment offered to residents by visiting artists isn't one of them.

Forget bingo and social teas, though both are featured activities at homes citywide. The nursing home live performance circuit is surprisingly vibrant, and not only because all manner of professional entertainers, from musicians to magicians to impersonators, eagerly ply their trades there.

For performers able to get past any potential stigma of playing for a captive audience of old people, these shows are more than just steady paying gigs easily slotted into an itinerary. They're a way of galvanizing a crowd rarely equaled in the hipster world.

"There's this perception that people who are institutionalized won't get something, when in fact it's the opposite; people are starved for entertainment," offers mentalist and magician Mysterion the Mind Reader, who estimates roughly five percent of the 300-odd shows he performs each year are for aged audiences.

"If I do a performance as part of a burlesque show or at a company party, it's often taken for granted," he adds.

Mysterion might have been referencing this morning's Heritage gig. Audience members alert enough to perceive the show are ridiculously appreciative, their joy palpable. And those that aren't—who knows what impact music might be having?

Last December, the CBC reported on Frank Russo, a neuroscientist doing research at Ryerson University who suggests music (and music therapy) might help those with cognitive impairment, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

You don't need to be a scientist to watch music transform an otherwise disconnected senior into a fully engaged spectator gleefully mooing and quacking along to "Old MacDonald Had A Farm." Just stop by your local nursing home during a weekly scheduled show.



Singer/songwriter Lenka Lichtenberg—whose gorgeous, ethereal vocals nabbed the Canadian Folk Music Award for Traditional Singer of the Year last fall—bristles slightly when these performances are described as entertainment. She sees music as “an essential need.”

“That’s especially true with seniors because very often you have people who are suffering memory loss, maybe Alzheimer’s,” offers Lichtenberg, who honed her craft—and vastly improved her Yiddish—playing the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care and the Bernard Betel Centre when her kids were growing up.

“Seniors often don’t have much left in their lives and don’t show much interest in anything,” Lichtenberg continues. “But the minute they hear music that means something to them, the signs of life come back. You can just imagine—music is the one thing people remember most, and they associate it with happier moments in their life.”

“Even those who are otherwise completely withdrawn will respond. They’re animated, smiling, clapping their hands, sometimes singing along even though they have stopped talking. It’s very potent and it makes these performances extremely meaningful for me.”

Today’s performance seems pretty meaningful to Tom Hocking, too, who clearly revels in being a ham.

The now-retired keyboardist—who plays Heritage’s bright, expansive dining hall every Thursday morning for an hour and whose set includes costume changes, gags, tall tales, a repertoire from the 1970s and ‘80s and the above-mentioned rubber chicken named Tony—says his decades on the circuit have convinced him that music is essential to happiness and well-being.

“I love coming here just to see a smile on the faces of the seniors as I play the old songs, hymns and melodies,” the effusive Hocking says. “And I look forward to many more entertaining years to come.”

That’s excellent news to resident Marguerite Godbout, who offers: “Tom is wonderful. He is one of the best entertainers here. He is comical. I enjoy all of his music, the hymns and country and

western music.”

Echoes resident Donald MacPherson: “Tom is pretty good and I look forward to seeing him every Thursday.”

“Music does seem to connect the residents to happier times in their lives. You can see the change in the mood,” concurs Suzette Greenidge, Activation Manager and Volunteer Coordinator with Heritage, where she’s worked for 20 years.

During Hocking’s performance, several staffers—who wheel the audience in and out—cheerlead from the sidelines, clapping and singing along.

Greenidge continues: “Even people who don’t speak English (a significant number of Heritage’s 200 residents are Cantonese-speaking Chinese) respond. It soothes your soul. The Chinese residents attend the English programs and the English speakers attend the Cantonese programs. Music is its own language; you don’t need to speak it to understand it.”



BJ Del Conte and his mother, Sylvia

Sylvia Del Conte is a case in point. The 83-year-old, who has lived at Heritage for about a decade, has always been a music fan, her son BJ Del Conte reveals. However, since being in Heritage, Ms. Del Conte—who is no longer communicative—has apparently become an avid Chinese opera fan.

“My mother is always front and centre when the residents play DVDs of Chinese opera,” Del Conte says. “She really lights up during the performances and enjoys the singing, the music and the colourful costumes.

“The live performances are a real treat,” he adds. “It pumps them up and is a high point of their day. They really like it when former wrestler Sweet Daddy Siki hosts karaoke. He’s a colourful character and everyone gets into it.”

“I can only imagine what it’s like to be in your twilight years and not physically capable of doing what you used to be able to do. So why are entertainers not bringing these people some kickass entertainment?” posits Mysterion the Mind Reader, adding that he often name-checks 1970s-era TV mentalist The Amazing Kreskin to give his audiences a frame of reference for his performance.

Mysterion continues: “My job as magician and a mentalist especially is to create a world of wonder. If I can take you out of your everyday and make you see something like you’re seeing it for the very first time, then my job is successful.”


“It might be something ridiculous, like a spoon bending that we know isn’t real, but people marvel and they start thinking it *is* psychic power because I always leave the door open to that possibility. People then have to say, ‘So if it wasn’t psychic power, what the heck was it?’

“Cheesy as it sounds, from my perspective I am making these people feel like kids again. And that,”

he says, "is a wonderful thing to watch people experience."

TAGS *Lenka Lichtenberg, Mysterion the Mind Reader, nursing homes, Tom Hocking*

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LaryOly

I used to love performing on the seniors-home circuit (which includes both retirement & nursing homes), but the difficulty of getting around by TTC really scuppered me.

I sing with backing tracks, and trying to lug my heavy sound-unit (on a dolly) around the TTC (since I don't drive) really opened my eyes to just how INaccessible the system is.

Accessible bus routes join with inaccessible streetcar routes, or inaccessible subway stations. There are parts of the subway system where you have to go 5 stops, to get to an accessible one—and even then, there's every possibility that the elevator is out-of-order in that station.

I had to turn down gigs, because I had no reasonable way of getting there with my sound unit. I've also injured myself several times, trying to lift my sound unit up & down the stairs of streetcars.

It's one thing to not be able to get around with a heavy sound unit, every so often. It's quite another to have mobility issues and not be able to use the TTC at all, except for Wheel-Trans (which is, itself, notoriously unreliable).

No wonder so many seniors are largely confined to their homes! I'm not referring to those in nursing homes, but to those who could otherwise get around, but with difficulty.

 0  0

2:47 pm on February 8, 2013

 Reply  Report

BJ Del Conte

Another great 'slice of the city you don't know' by Kim. I'd say that even if my Mother wasn't in the piece. I just wish she didn't have her grumpy face on! Typically, she's always smiling and really lights up the room.

ps: One of the performers at Heritage is wrestler Sweet Daddy Siki. He hosts karaoke at the place every now and again. And he hosts karaoke at Duke Of York tavern next door on Saturday afternoon.

 3  0

1:10 pm on January 23, 2013

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

Joan Semple

Great story Kim.

 2  0

11:02 am on January 23, 2013

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

Joey DAMMIT!

Very nicely put Elaine...Are you refering to anyone's elderly parents that I may know? Seriously Kim... your articles just keep getting more n' more interesting. Keep knocking that ball out of the park girl!!!!!!

 3  0

10:36 am on January 23, 2013

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

Elaine Gasco

Nice post once again, Kim. It's an important topic. I'm at that age when all my friends are worrying about how to give their aging parents good care in their "Twilight Years". Music...we love it when we're young. We still love it when we're old. Thanks.

 3  0

10:27 am on January 23, 2013

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

personunknown

Seniors often don't have much left in their lives and don't show much interest in anything

...Wow...

 3  0

9:56 pm on January 22, 2013

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Lenka

...yes, that sentence is "wow" , cruel and incorrect, when not explained. It was not meant about seniors in general of course: i was talking specifically about those in wheel chairs, and with Alzheimers, those who are wheeled into a retirement home's social hall showing no signs of interest in anything at all, and then... magic happens and music makes them light up and come alive.

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11:57 pm on March 1, 2013

[⚠ Report](#)