

“Mister Rogers Sings 21 Favorite Songs From ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’”--Fred Rogers (1973)

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Essay by Max King (guest post)*



Fred Rogers

Fred Rogers' first love--perhaps his greatest love--was music. From the earliest age, he gravitated toward the power of music, learning tunes by heart from the radio or on trips to the theater with his parents and little sister and faithfully reproducing the music on his small toy piano. He later said that he could only successfully express himself as a boy through his finger tips on the keyboard of this instrument.

Later, Rogers' love for music fashioned him into an accomplished pianist, an honored music major at Rollins College, and a writer who created over 200 songs and 13 operas in addition to the 900-plus television scripts he produced. He still, and always, expressed himself best through music, and he loved nothing better than improvising on the piano with his great friend and musical partner from “Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,” Johnny Costa. But music was more than a source of joy and a creative building block for Rogers' television productions; it was the instrument he used to communicate some of his exceptional values.

Rogers put the first television show he developed--“The Children's Corner”--to rest when he came to feel that it was just entertaining for children and not educational. While continuing in the television field, Rogers studied at the Western Pennsylvania Theological Seminary and the University of Pittsburgh child-development department in order to equip himself to make the highest-quality educational television possible. From the seminarians and the academics he got a powerful combination of strong ethical values and the educational tools to make the life-changing television he envisioned. And he knew, almost instinctively, that music would be a key part of his undertaking.

Rogers wanted primarily to convey three things to young children: that they were worthwhile and even special; that they could count on the world to give them structure and reliability; and that they could manage the most complex feelings and thoughts. He delivered these messages

through the “Neighborhood of Make Believe's” imaginary theater and through his own talks with children as the host of the show. But, most importantly, he delivered these messages through the medium of music, the medium that felt most like home to Rogers himself.

All the key tunes from the “Neighborhood”--songs like “Won't You Be My Neighbor,” “You Are Special,” “Sometimes People Are Good,” “I Like To Take My Time,” and “Everybody's Fancy,” all on the recording “Mister Rogers Sings 21 Favorite Songs From 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood”--were designed to deliver the crucial lessons and values that Rogers, the educator, wanted children to hear. His work was distinctive in its time for focusing on the social and emotional growth of children, rather than their cognitive development. And he used the songs--often repeated again and again--to educate.

The lyrics of a song like “What Do You Do With The Mad That You Feel” were designed to give real help to children who were struggling with their feelings. The first three stanzas are worth reading to feel their power:

*What do you do with the mad that you feel
When you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...
And nothing you do seems very right?*

*What do you do? Do you punch a bag?
Do you pound some clay or some dough?
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?
Or see how fast you go?*

*It's great to be able to stop
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,
And be able to do something else instead
And think this song....*

And Rogers used the repetition of songs to give his viewers a sense of structure and reliability. The song “Tomorrow” was repeated at the end of each show (except on Friday, when it was adjusted to reflect the fact that the program wouldn't be back until Monday). Again, a look at the words--here, the first stanza--helps us understand the emotional reassurance Rogers wanted to deliver:

*Tomorrow, tomorrow
We'll start the day tomorrow with a song or two
Tomorrow, tomorrow
We'll start the day tomorrow with a smile for you*

Fred Rogers wanted to tackle the most difficult issues of life, for children and for their adults, and he did. He created theme weeks on death, violence, divorce, loss and other hard topics. His mantra was: “Whatever is mentionable is manageable.” And music was the strongest tool he had to convey that to the children he so loved. He used his songs to instruct, to encourage, to cajole and to reassure these millions of children who came to his “Neighborhood” because of the love and honesty and great, good common sense they would hear from him--often as not set to

music.

POSTSCRIPT: It is worth ending this essay with a story from Fred Rogers' childhood, a story that reflects the grace and love he enjoyed as a boy. Rogers always felt that his parents and grandparents treated him like a serious person, listened to him, and gave him the help he was looking for. He was very grateful for that, and he tried to convey to the parents who watched his show that their role was the essential ingredient to the success of their children.

When he was about ten years old, Fred Rogers confided in his grandmother, whose family was quite wealthy, that he hoped to get a real piano to replace the toy instrument on which he had already learned so much music.

“Nana” McFeely listened carefully to Fred, and discussed why he wanted a piano and what it would mean to him. Finally, thinking that a little piano for a little child couldn’t be that expensive, “Nana” McFeely offered to buy one for the young boy. Fred took a trolley the four miles from “Nana's” Squirrel Hill home to the Steinway & Sons store in downtown Pittsburgh. According to the staff there, Fred spent several hours playing every piano in the store and then told the salesmen there that he had picked his favorite: a second-hand, 1920 Steinway Concert Grand Model D Ebonized piano that had been shipped to New York for a full “heirloom” restoration that put the piano in perfect condition.

It was nine feet long, weighed about 1,000 pounds, and--as a second-hand piano--was worth about \$3,000 in the late 1930s. It was, and still is today, the gold standard when it comes to concert grand performance pianos. The same model piano, brand new, now sells for nearly \$130,000, according to Steinway staff. The salesmen chuckled among themselves as the little boy headed to the trolley to ride back to Squirrel Hill to see his grandmother.

They were stunned a little while later, when Fred returned with a check--nearly \$50,000 in today’s dollars--for the full price of the piano.

“Nana” McFeely had made a promise and she was going to keep it, even if it cost a huge sum, even for her, a wealthy heiress. She kept her commitment to let Fred pick out his own piano, and it utterly changed his life.

Fred Rogers took the piano with him everywhere for the rest of his life, and composed most of his famous music on his concert grand. It was with him growing up in Latrobe; it went with him to Pittsburgh, to Toronto, back to Pittsburgh and the educational-television station where Fred made his programming, and eventually to his home in Squirrel Hill, not far from where his grandmother lived when she had given it to him. The music that he conceived and composed on this piano was the force that propelled his work, his career, and his artistic growth. Just as importantly, it gave him confidence in his abilities and his character and gave him a lifetime of solace and comfort. And it was this music that helped give Fred Rogers a place as one of the great innovators in the evolving fields of television and education.

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