

A Short History of the Sing-a-Long

by Dorg

Christmas falls every year on the 25th of December. And the Sing-A-Long is always on the 23rd. We considered putting the Sing-A-Long on the 24th but that was too close to Christmas. A mob of rowdy guys on your doorstep on the 24th of December could easily interfere with a family visit or present opening for families of European descent or other Christmas Eve activities. The 22nd was a viable option. But we ruled that out because we figured the closer to Christmas the more money people would donate. So the Sing-A-Long ended up on the 23rd of December. It was like it belonged there and it felt right to do it on that day. And so it has stayed there , for 30 years.

It's not a recognized public holiday like Christmas. It's not a bank holiday. You won't find it on any calendar. But you will find dozens of guys I know who circle the date on the calendar hanging on their kitchen wall, or intrinsically just know where they need to be on the evening of December 23rd.

Unless you have been to the Sing-A-Long it is hard to understand what it is. If I had to try and describe it in a sentence I would say , "every year for the past 30 years a group of my guy friends and I get together on the 23rd of December and go door to door in my neighborhood, singing Christmas carols to raise money for the Salvation Army." But it is much more than just that! In addition, it has evolved and redefined itself over the years. Two things that make it so special are its unique energy and its longevity. The Christmas Spirit meets the Full Monty. Goodwill and charity mix with rowdiness and goofyness. It's about a bunch of skinny young teenagers who started out doing something 30 years ago who are now a bunch of heavier middle-aged guys still doing it.

To truly understand the Sing-A-Long you have to start at the beginning - back in 1973 when we were in grade 10. For my entire high school years my Mum's house became a bit of a hang-out for my high school friends and me. Three ingredients made the house the preferred place to hang-out on a Friday night. The most important one was my Mum's lenient ways, and liberal, sensible, practical views on raising her son. She knew that it was natural for a 15 year old to experiment with booze. And the house became the lab where we conducted experiments every weekend. She figured better to have my friends and me drinking in her house than on the streets. The second one was my older sister's willingness to "tap" for us. "Tap" was the cool term we used to describe when an older person went to the liquor store at 18th and Dunbar and bought booze for us. And the third ingredient was the location of our house. Situated on the corner of 11th and Crown, it was truly the epicenter of the neighbourhood. If you were in grade 10 at Lord Byng High School in 1973 and you were looking for some fun on Friday night , 3994 West 11th was the place to be: Doroghy's Pub.

One time we got together on a Friday night that just happened to be a few days before Christmas. It was Friday, December 23rd. My sister Miriam had kindly gone to the Dunbar liquor store for us in her white 1968 Volkswagen bug with no defroster, and picked up the booty. It consisted of a couple of cases of Labatt's 50. Remember Labatt's 50? She also bought my friend George Cronkite a mickey of vodka. George used to drink vodka figuring that his parents wouldn't be able to smell it on his breath. The rest of the order consisted of Lemon Gin, (it had instructions on the label warning you that if you chugged it too quickly you could go blind), a jug of Calona Wine's Royal Red, and a bottle of Jamaican Rum.

That cold winter night the drinking reduced our inhibitions and led us out the door with booze on our breath and a song in our hearts. There were five or six of us. I seem to remember the three Peters ,Zell, Varsek and Vieira were there. George with his sparkling clean breath was there along with Jack Hole and Rob Lego. There may have been more but I think that was the group that formed the first Sing-A-Long. For some reason there were none of our friends who were girls along with us that night. They usually hung out with us but weren't there that night. Their absence inadvertently led to one of the last and longest running bastions of annual male bonding. Since that day the Sing-A-Long has always been just for the fellows.

Our friend from school, Andrea Leitao, one of the absent girls, lived a mile away at 3536 West 23rd in a big old beautiful family home. Her parents were very cool and got a real kick out of us showing up on the doorstep drunk and singing Christmas Carols. Along the way we knocked on strangers' doors and when they were opened we belted out an out-of-tune, wrong tempo version of We Wish You a Merry Christmas. We sounded terrible and got worse as the night went on. It was a fun silly night, and when we got back to school after the Christmas break we recalled what a blast it had been. Based on this, we decided to do it again the next year when we were in grade 11. And then again in grade 12. I don't remember much about the early days except for one night when we were out it snowed like crazy. When people opened their doors to hear us we pelted a volley of snowballs at them. Bah humbug!

Word got out about how much fun the Sing-A-Long was and soon we had a dozen guys showing up every year at my Mum's place. The high school gang turned into a university and college gang. Andrea's parents' home became a regular stop on our route. Her Mum and Dad and five brothers would anxiously await our arrival and would have hot toddies and rum and egg-nogs waiting for us.

It was the early eighties and Ghetto Blasters, gigantic radios with cassette decks built into them, were very popular. I bought one that was the size of a small suitcase and sounded great. We'd bring it on each Sing-A-Long and at the end of our repertoire of three Christmas Carols we would play the Jose Feliciano Christmas hit Felice Navidad. As it played all of us would dance Mexican style on peoples' front lawns. We'd roll our tongues to make Mexican sounds all the while shouting 'Arreeba, Arreeba' as we kicked our feet through the snow and flung each other around square dance style. This became an inexplicable, strange ritual during the Sing-A-Long and lasted for nearly a dozen

years. We affectionately referred to it as the Mexican Hat Dance Finale. The Leitao's family and many other families in the neighborhood came to expect the famous Spanish routine as a signal that their annual three song visit had come to an end.

By the early eighties the Sing-A-Long had grown to 15 guys participating, and I had moved into my own apartment in Kits. It was too small for the group, so Mum agreed to allow us the run of her house every December 23rd. It was during this period that a number of important innovations shaped and improved the Sing-A-Long.

Food was the first one. I think some famous general was quoted as saying that an army travels on its stomach. One year I realized how difficult it was for the 15 of us to sing and drink for four hours on empty stomachs. So I organized a dinner for the group every year. And it was nothing but guy food - Kentucky Fried Chicken, potato salad, ham, lasagna and nacho chips. For a few of those years I even sprang for a catering company, Caravetta's Classic Catering, to feed us all. Around that time that I also started sending out invitations to the Sing-A-Long. I fancy myself a bit of a cartoonist and I always came up with some dumb headline or slogan. For the next ten years I took pride in creating clever invitations and distributing them to a growing list of guests. Then one year I decided it was a waste of time. The same guys had been coming to the party for over a decade and they knew it was always held on the 23rd of December!

By 1984 the Sing-A-Long had grown to 25 fellows and we had been going strong for 11 years. By this time we were 26 years old and I sensed that we needed some purpose beyond getting drunk and rowdy. That was the year I wore a red felt Santa hat, and when people came to the door we asked them to donate money to us. Some people at one house asked what the money was for and I blurted out the Salvation Army. That night we raised \$36.00.

From then on the Sing-A-Long became a fundraiser. The Salvation Army being the benefactor was almost accidental. It was a snap decision yelled out for lack of a different idea. Looking back 30 years later I think it was a good idea. The Sally-Ann and Christmas just seem to go together well. As the years went by the amount we collected grew and grew. Soon it was over \$500, and I would proudly mail it to the main Vancouver Salvation Army office every year.

One year when we were out caroling someone told us to take a hike. They said "the Salvation Army is the last place on earth we would donate our money to. At Christmas they force hungry people to come in and pray before they feed them, now get lost!" That comment really stuck in my mind and disturbed me. Two days later I decided that instead of mailing the money in I would take it in and see for myself what went on at the Mission. I hopped in my car on Christmas morning and drove to the Salvation Army Harbour Lights Mission on Cordova and Pender. What I witnessed there touched me in a special way. The Salvation Army fulfills a very, very real need in the community. On the Christmas day that I showed up they served over 1,800 turkey dinners. What would those unfortunate people have done for a meal without the Salvation Army? I saw all types there. All ages. 70% men. Lots of drunks and junkies. People who were really down and

out. Lost souls with no place to go and no food on Christmas day. Smashed faces and broken lives. The smell of rubbies and drunks filling the lobby mingled with the stench of stale beer and cigarettes. There was not a lot of joy and merriment in the half block lineup to get inside. Each person in that line had a sad and unique story to tell. And on that wet grey Christmas morning their stories seemed so bleak. Some people appeared ashamed or self-conscious at finding themselves there. I tried not to be judgmental, and that was hard. But after I spent the afternoon serving meals, the only judgment I walked away with was that the knuckleheaded home owner who told us to get lost was wrong in his accusations. He was a bigger turkey than the biggest turkey we served that day.

Since that day I have spent every Christmas at the Salvation Army Harbour Lights Mission helping out. The staff are among the warmest and most generous people I have ever met. I think that the Salvation Army religion (or whatever you want to call it) is a really cool faith. For the last ten years the Mission has been run by Major Samuel Fame. He is a living saint, and watching him interact with his clients, as he calls them is the closest I have ever gotten to the real spirit of Christmas.

In 1988 the Sing-A-Long broke the five hundred dollar a night barrier. But along the way we had lost something. The teenage exuberance was long gone. All of my friends were hitting 30 and many had young families, demanding jobs, and hectic lives; particularly around Christmas. In the early years we would just start to get going and be having maximum fun around 9:30pm. Suddenly I was finding that many of my buddies were bailing out around 9:30pm to go home to be with their kids. We were losing steam. That was when the Sing-A-Long got its second wind.

I had been a Big Brother since 1981. My little brother, Dave Curran is 10 years younger than I am. We were matched for eight years. After he turned 18 we no longer were part of the Big Brothers program, but we remain great friends to this day. Little Dave, as I like to call him, is the lead singer of a kick-ass rock band called Beluga . He has always taken his singing seriously and has a great voice. For years he took singing lessons from Ray Carrol of the Platters. Little Dave was a natural for the Sing-A-Long so one year when I felt he was old enough I invited him to join us. At that time, out of our group of 25 guys, he was the only one who could actually sing. As a bonus every year he brought half a dozen of his younger wild friends. The Sing-A-Long had become rejuvenated!

The addition of Little Dave and his enthusiastic young friends made us sound and appear far more professional. But we didn't look professional. Our straggly appearance even made some home owners believe that we kept the money they donated and bought booze with it. We needed a cohesive look that signaled we were serious carolers. We needed some type of uniform or costume. Beautiful red felt hats with snow white trim for each guy along with leather jingle bell straps for everyone was my wish to Santa that year. But since Santa was probably mad at me for impersonating him with booze on my breath for all these years, I knew that I would have to make them myself. So in the fall of 1988, a group of my friends got together at my apartment, and with sewing machines and leather punches; with felt and fabric and rawhide, we formed a little assembly line. At the end of the night we had 30 fuzzy bright red Santa hats and 30 leather straps (each with 5 bells on

them) that you could hold in your hand and shake to make a festive jingle.

Handing out the hats and bells at that year's Sing-A-Long was pure magic. It was like giving Christmas presents to 5 year olds. Everybody quickly put on their hats and jingled their bells and couldn't wait to get outside in the snow to perform with our new look and sound.

I want to quickly tell you about five more important Sing-A-Long innovations that followed in the years to come and improved the event.

1) Song Sheets. It became clear that White Christmas, Silver Bells, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, Deck the Halls and Santa Claus is Coming to Town were the songs that people wanted to hear. But we kept forgetting the words to them. Talk about a bunch of knuckleheads. One year one of the guys had a brilliant idea and showed up with song sheets for everyone. They included our standard favorites and dozens more. And the hits just kept on coming!

2) Laminated Song Sheets. It was my friend Jack Hole who recognized that the song sheets were turning into a pulpy mess being exposed to the rain and snow over the years. He improved on the song sheet idea by having them laminated.

3) A Big Wooden Sign. With the advent of hats and bells we now looked like a club or organized group. But a group of what? One year Dan Mooney took it upon himself to make a big wooden (5 feet by 5 feet) sign that read "Dorg's Annual Sing-A-Long, all proceeds to the Salvation Army". The sign even had a blank space after the word annual; where I inserted a number each year to denote which year of the Sing-A-Long it was (15th, 16th 17th etc.). The sign also had a big red thermometer painted on the right hand side to track the dollar amount of donations that we had received that night. Innovations like this really helped us push the fundraising total to the next level. Our proceeds went up by 25% that year just from carrying the sign with us. People now automatically knew the -who, what, when, where and why of the Sing-A-Long. That Dan Mooney is a real marketing genius.

4) A Map of the Route. Our carefully planned route was the key to our fundraising success. Through the years we wasted so much time arguing which direction to take our mob so the introduction of a route map was an excellent idea.

5) A Real Santa Suit. Yes I have my own Santa Suit. No I don't wear it very often. Only at Christmas.

The map and the route we went on, and our point of origin evolved over the years too. In 1989 I finally moved out of my one bedroom apartment and bought a house. That year the Sing-A-Long moved to its third originating location. Since this story is meant to be a bit of a historical review it may be worth noting the different locations where the Sing-A-Long has been held:

1973 to 1976 3994 West 11th Avenue

1976 to 1989 3956 Blenheim Street

1989 to present 1725 Dunbar Street

Each house has served as a place to gather, socialize, eat and drink and practice a round of songs before hitting the streets. Many of the guys that come to the Sing-A-Long only see each other once a year. There is a wonderful feeling of fellowship as each guy arrives and the living room and kitchen slowly fill up.

It was at the Dunbar location that we hit our stride in making the Sing-A-Long a finely tuned fundraising machine. The average house will give you a \$5 to \$20 donation. But a pub or restaurant packed with people might give you up to \$100. My Dunbar house is in a very strategic location for the Sing-A-Long. It is located just around the corner from a 'cash cow', Jeremiah's Pub. To start off with every year we usually hit four or five houses along the way and then descend on Jeremiah's. The doors swing open and 30 guys pile in whaling away at the top of their lungs. Change starts flying out of pockets and bills are whisked out of wallets. The patrons can't believe their eyes and are just plain old compelled to give.

From there it is up to Broadway and a ten-block strip of restaurants, coffee shops, pubs and bistros. We have been milking this route for so long that many of the establishments' owners know we are coming and are actually waiting for us. Along the way we drop in at a liquor store, a Safeway and a Laundromat. Wherever there are people we will stop to collect money. One year we even boarded a city bus, singing along the aisle and collecting money as we were whisked down Broadway. Half a dozen of the watering-holes that we visit have live music. The bands almost always interrupt their sets to accompany us on a Christmas tune. Some places have small stages for us to jump up onto. We're not shy and we welcome the opportunity to perform.

Rarely is there any resistance put up by the businesses we visit. However very occasionally we have gotten a nervous stare from a new restaurant manager as 30 strangers descend upon his quite clientele. We stop cars going down the street and serenade them. We confront people at cash machines and sing while they withdraw their money. We have no shame, we are on a mission.

As you can see the restaurants and pubs have a higher cash yield than the houses. But the houses are important too. We have stumbled across houses with little kids in them and it's like pure magic. Mum and Dad rush to get their four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter onto the porch so they can enjoy our singing and see Santa. Often they bring them out to their front porch in their arms. It's like something out of a lost bygone era. The kids' eyes light up and the parents are beaming. People don't do this anymore and parents want their kids to experience something old-fashioned and special. So what if we can't sing, no one sweats the small stuff.

Countless houses have invited us inside. It's what Christmas is all about. Strangers outside in the cold are invited inside for some refreshments. Something to fortify us and send us on our way. We have been served every type of Christmas cake, shortbread and chocolate treat you can think of. Imagine serving snacks to 30 strangers that suddenly show up on your doorstep. It's fun to watch our hosts scurrying to their china cabinet to find 30 shot glasses to serve us some Christmas cheer!

Although through the houses we average lower cash donations than the restaurants, there has been one big exception. A guy named Frans Pellikaan owns a series of small bungalows on the southwest corner of 6th and Alma. Every year he takes one of them and turns it into the Gingerbread House. He covers it with elf statues, train sets, fake snow, reindeer on the roof and elaborate mechanical Christmas decorations. He paints the house in red and white stripes and puts up 3,000 Christmas bulbs for effect. Add to that some spotlights, a sound system, dry ice and tons of signage and you get the picture. The Gingerbread House naturally became the ideal stop for our Sing-A-Long. And Frans loves having us. Every year he invites us inside to sing and have drinks and then as we leave he writes us a cheque for \$350. We like Frans!

I have often thought of the Sing-A-Long as nothing more than a vehicle to efficiently facilitate wealth redistribution. When you strip out the emotional Christmasy aspect of it and dispense with the good will toward men and sentimental, gushy, Santa stuff, you are left with a very practical means of getting money from one part of the city where there's too much money to another part of the city where there isn't enough. It's no big deal because we are talking about a miniscule amount of money in the scheme of things. But I still like the philosophical simplicity of looking at it this way. Think about it. The amount of money that most people have who live on the westside of Vancouver is almost embarrassing. The area is crawling with wealthy people. It is one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Canada. West Point Grey homes often sell for millions of dollars. Then compare 1st and Dunbar with Hastings and Main. Vancouver's East side holds the dubious distinction of being the poorest postal code area in the entire country according to Statistics Canada. But how can this abject poverty be so close to the Westside? I'll never be able to answer that question, but every Christmas my friends and I will be able to perform a small symbolic exercise in fiscal equalization. Take some of the money from the haves and give it to the have-nots. And just like Robin Hood's Merry Men we have some laughs along the way without getting too serious about things like I have just done in this paragraph. It's only a couple of grand each year that we raise, but it's money that belongs on a table at Cordova and Pender in the form of a butterball turkey covered in

gravy with all the fixings. The annual Sing-A-Long just helps to move some of the money down the road where it can do some good. I'd better get off my high horse and back to my story before someone reading this asks me to sell my luxury car and donate the proceeds to the needy.

So many funny things have happened at the Sing-A-Long. One year my friend David Kincaid brought his golden lab named Sam to the Sing-A-Long. It was the same year that my friend Peter Vieira brought his chocolate lab named Chomondoley. We tried to put fake antlers on both of them to make them look like reindeer. But a dog will always look like a dog even with an elaborate headpiece. By the time we left the house both sets of antlers had fallen off. Out on the road one of them somehow managed to pick up a flashing set of lights that doubled as a collar, and the other one had a bright red ribbon tied around his neck. Dogs by their nature seem to add value and a positive note to almost any event they are at and they did so for us that evening. However, when we got home Chomondoley was with us but Sam was nowhere to be seen. Even after we counted the money at my house and most of the fellows had left there was still no sign of Sam. Kincaid began to get concerned sometime around midnight. He walked around the neighborhood looking for his dog but there was no sign of Sam. Then he drove around the neighborhood. There was snow on the ground that year and Kincaid had no problem retracing our tracks in his four wheel drive truck. He got back to the house at 1:30am, disappointed and worried. Dave really loved his dog. I even think he came back at 3 or 4 in the morning to conduct another search but still no sign of Sam. Dave Kincaid finally came back at 8 am to find Sam sleeping on my front porch. Sam's stomach was bloated and his breath stunk. He had been out all night eating garbage. Dog's have their own peculiar way of enjoying the Sing-A-Long and are always welcome!

Other memorable bumps in the road include the year that my friend Hugh Ruthven accidentally brought his girlfriend. I forgot to tell him the evening was stag. She decided to stick around for dinner but decided to forego the rest of the evening. Good call.

One year a woman was so excited to see us that she began undressing on her balcony.

Now we have a repertoire of 10 or 12 Christmas songs that we have mastered. But heck why just stick to seasonal songs? Even though it's December 23rd, we still sneak in the occasional non-Christmas tune. The Theme from Shaft is a real crowd pleaser. When Issac Hayes penned this inner city classic afro tune, in his wildest dreams he never envisioned 30 white guys dressed as elves belting out their half-baked rendition somewhere in the Great White North. Every Christmas we ask the musical question "Who's the black private Dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks?" Pretty festive wouldn't you say? And then there was the year that Little Dave stayed behind after we left a house we had caroled at and serenaded the pretty 19-year-old girl in her housecoat with his rendition of Jimmy Hendrix's, Let me Stand Next to your Fire. And of course no Christmas Sing-A-Long would be complete without Santa singing Frank Sinatra's classic, I Did it My Way.

Ten years into the Sing-A-Long, as we were ready to broaden our musical horizons, my friend Dan Russell invited us to be special guests on his sports talk-radio program. That year a second tradition, being showcased on the radio each year, was born. We weren't guests in his studio, but performed, remotely, on location from the streets of Point Grey. This was in 1984 and before the advent of cell phones. It meant that at a pre-arranged time we would call into the radio station from wherever we were, at a pay phone on the street, or maybe in a house someone had invited us into. Each year Dan would take his two hour evening radio program and give it a festive twist on December 23rd. He was probably a bit desperate for programming material that night anyway, since not a lot of sports stories break two days before Christmas. The standard routine was to call in at 10:15pm. Dan would give us a long hyped up intro and announce our location. Since he had been a frequent guest during the first decade of Sing-A-Longs his comments were always complimentary, accurate and good-natured. After a minute or two of small talk to set up the piece, the gang would break into song over the radio. We would always do one Christmas carol and end with We Wish You a Merry Christmas.

The broadcasts have continued to this day and add several positive dimensions to the Sing-A-Long. A bit of pre-promotion can't hurt the fundraising effort. Dan would plug our upcoming performance all night. Occasionally houses that we called on would report having heard about us on the radio before our arrival. The broadcasts also meant that my friends' wives at home could tune in and confirm their husbands whereabouts. This would put an end to any lingering suspicions surrounding their spouses' absence every year from what is surely an important night for family bonding. Finally the broadcasts gave us notoriety and were a real novelty. How often do you get to sing Christmas carols to 30,000 sports fans at home listening to their radios? Mormon Tabernacle Choir, look out!

Two years ago I realized that the Sing-A-Long had become a classic. If you look the word classic up in the dictionary it means "something that transcends generations" Two years ago my friend Ian McLean brought his 18-year-old son, Scott and his 65-year-old Dad, Cam to the Sing-A-Long.

We need to recruit younger members. Even little Dave and his friends are starting to get old. My young nephew Jordan has become a welcome addition lately. He is a music major at UBC and his tuba (euphonium) adds a beautiful melody in the background of each song, and it looks festive in a Norman Rockwell painting sort of way as he lugs it from door to door. I hope he will bring his friends, and that Scott will bring his friends, and that we can keep on going strong for another 30 years.

Some of the guys that come to the Sing-A-Long have made it to almost every one. I don't think anyone has a record of perfect attendance, but I know Peter Varsek has only missed two.

Recently our fundraising totals have gotten up to around \$2,000. It has been tradition at the end of each Sing-A-Long to count the money on my living room floor. We turn the big wooden sign we carry upside down and scatter the change and bills onto it. A dozen guys usually wait around, curious to learn the final total. And every year we seem to exceed the previous year's total. If we are shy of a record breaking amount the guys always pitch in their own money to take us over our target.

This story has mainly been about December 23rd and December 25th. But what about December 24th? That day is a major bummer, cleanup day. I am a lazy bachelor slob to begin with. My two cleaning ladies have always sheltered me from the mundane tasks of vacuuming, tidying up and domesticity in general. Unfortunately they take holidays over Christmas so I am left to my own inept devices. The cleanup takes most of the morning. In my hungover state as I try to restore my home to a semblance of order I sometimes wonder if the Sing-A-Long is worth doing.

There was one year in particular when the place looked like it was straight out of a bombing raid in downtown Kabul! Also that year it had poured rain the night before the Sing-A-Long and we were missing a few of the key regulars. Our fundraising numbers were down and it felt like we were losing a bit of the spark that makes the Sing-A-Long so special. I actually considered canceling it the next year. Then on Christmas Day at the Salvation Army something happened that I will never forget. We were serving the Christmas dinners and out of the corner of my eye I saw someone I thought I recognized. I looked for a second time and was dismayed to see a scruffy and skinny guy I went to high school with seated in the corner of the large dining hall. I didn't know him well but he was definitely an old classmate from our Lord Byng Days. His first name was Ron, and I couldn't remember his last name. He didn't see me as he sat quietly eating his supper. He seemed unengaged and resigned. He looked like he was close to giving up. Despondent. I moved quickly out of his sight line and from a distance verified he was who I thought he was. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go up to him and ask him how he was, but I felt it might be uncomfortable for both of us. I wanted to wish him a Merry Christmas. I really wanted to connect with him, but I was certain that my overture would misfire and just result in an awkward moment. I couldn't think of what to say or do, so I took the easy route out and did nothing. But as I drove home from the Salvation Army that afternoon I decided that as long as we could we gather on December 23rd to Sing-A-Long and raise a bit of money for a good cause we would.