



Same Boat Music: Just sing!

Mark and Helen Johnson introduce Out of the Ark Music's new sister company.

Mark and Helen Johnson have been writing songs together professionally for nearly 30 years. They are founders, co-owners and principal songwriters for their long-established educational publishing company, Out of the Ark Music, as well as its new sister company, Same Boat Music. Their songs are currently used in over 18,000 primary schools in the UK, as well as further afield. We caught up with them to find out more about their journey, and to explore the transformational power of songs for all ages.



Q How did Out of the Ark Music first start, and why?

Helen: Neither of us had any expectation whatsoever of becoming full-time songwriters, let alone starting an educational publishing company! It was the autumn of 1989 and I'd just accepted a new job as a teacher in a primary school in Surrey. I was more surprised than anybody when the headteacher announced to the staff: 'Helen's written a musical – she's doing Christmas!' It wasn't true, but it was certainly a great challenge! At that time, we were very aware of just how few quality musical resources were available for children. And all too often it seemed they were an excuse for uninspiring, patronising and poorly crafted songs. Mark and I literally spent the half-term, and a few weeks after it, sat at the piano creating our first ever nativity musical, *Off to Bethlehem*.

Mark: I remember vividly during that very first performance, there was one particular song of worship where I felt the tangible sense of God's presence and approval. It really felt like we were at the start of something altogether exciting and new. Incredibly, by the following summer, we had both left our jobs to pursue the possibility of a career in songwriting.

Q So where did the name Out of the Ark Music come from?

Helen: With the help of a kind sponsor, and with very few other responsibilities, we were able to give a whole year to explore, to play, to pray – and to seek God together for what it might look like, to write songs for a living. With no real experience or training, we had no choice but to rely on God for direction. It was during a time of prayer together that we were drawn to the story of Noah. The idea of the ark being filled with 'everything with the breath of life in it' really struck a chord. Here was a

picture of beauty, colour, movement, diversity, richness, variety – life and breath stored up in a vessel, to be released into future generations. It became a picture of our own songs – to be just as rich, as varied and colourful – and full of that very same breath of life. And so Out of the Ark Music became the vessel to contain all those songs.

Q What has been the response of schools to the Christian content of your songs?

Helen: Our songbooks have always contained a healthy mix of songs about God, songs about life, ourselves and the world around us. We recognise that not all of them will be appropriate for every school situation, but by providing material that talks about God, we are offering the option and opportunity for children to hear and enjoy what they might not experience anywhere else. As an educational publisher, it would be inappropriate for us to write overtly zealous material. But in providing songs of life, colour and goodness, we believe they all reflect something of the broad nature and substance of God.

Teachers seem to recognise and appreciate the songs for their being relevant, enjoyable and educationally sound. We work hard to maintain the quality of our songs by careful crafting, writing catchy melodies and life-affirming lyrics.

Mark: Incredibly, over nearly 30 years, I can only think of a couple of negative comments about the Christian content of our songs. We've had many more letters of thanks and appreciation. Moreover, in schools where other faiths are predominant, we've heard of how our songs are regularly used for their wholesome and even Christian content! It seems that by writing strong melodies, with thoughtful lyrics, it allows us the platform to say more than we could have expected possible. My favourite story is one of an OFSTED inspector in the north of England, who wrote to say that having heard one of our Easter songs in a school assembly, she had renewed her childhood faith in Jesus.

Q You've spoken about the transformational power of songs and singing. Can you expand on that?

Helen: Out of the Ark Music have recently conducted an intensive study into the power of singing in schools, with incredible results (<https://www.outoftheark.co.uk/singing-school-project/>). We've had the privilege of seeing confidence expanded, community increased, learning quickened, mood lifted, enjoyment shared, and atmospheres totally changed. If you put all that potential directly into a worshipping community environment, the transformational power of singing is catapulted into a whole new dimension!

It has been said that songwriters are among our most important theologians, because of the vital role that songs play as we sing them – not just on Sundays but throughout the week, and for the whole of our lives. Christian pastor AW Tozer (1897–1963) said: ‘What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.’ Well-crafted, biblically-founded songs have the potential to embed all that life-giving truth into the very fabric of our lives.

Mark: I think it was Andrew Fletcher – a seventeenth-century writer and politician – who once said, ‘Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.’ We’ve seen the power of songs to transform individuals, to impact groups, families and even communities. What wouldn’t be possible, if this same transformation were extended – at a cultural and spiritual level – into wider societies and even the nation?!

Q Same Boat Music is an exciting new venture. What is it, and what are the main differences between Same Boat Music and Out of the Ark?

Helen: Same Boat Music has been created primarily to serve churches and homes. But in terms of vision and values, they are totally aligned. Both exist to encourage individuals and communities to experience and enjoy ‘life to the full’, by providing the very best songs and singing resources we can. We are all about education, transformation, faith and celebration. It’s probably fair to say that there are way more similarities than differences between the two. The essential difference is that Out of the Ark Music was set up to serve schools, and Same Boat Music is for churches and homes.

As you’d expect, there’s much greater opportunity for more ‘overtly Christian’ content in the Same Boat Music catalogue, but we believe that there is a real appetite for more broadly themed songs within the Church.

Mark: In the same way that Out of the Ark Music has proven to be popular with teachers and parents, not just with the children, our aim with Same Boat Music is for the songs to find homes in the hearts of congregations and families – of *all* ages. These aren’t just children’s songs!

Same Boat Music is currently a much smaller vessel than the Ark, and it’s still in its infancy. We are eager to allow perceived needs and feedback to shape how we develop things, and we’d welcome any comments and suggestions that ROOTS users may have on what we produce (www.sameboatmusic.com).

The main similarity for ROOTS users is that you still get to access four songs per issue for free from the whole library of songs from Out of the Ark Music and Same Boat Music. The main difference is that this will now be called Same Boat Music within ROOTS as we feel this fits better with your mission to provide resources for worship and learning for the whole Church.

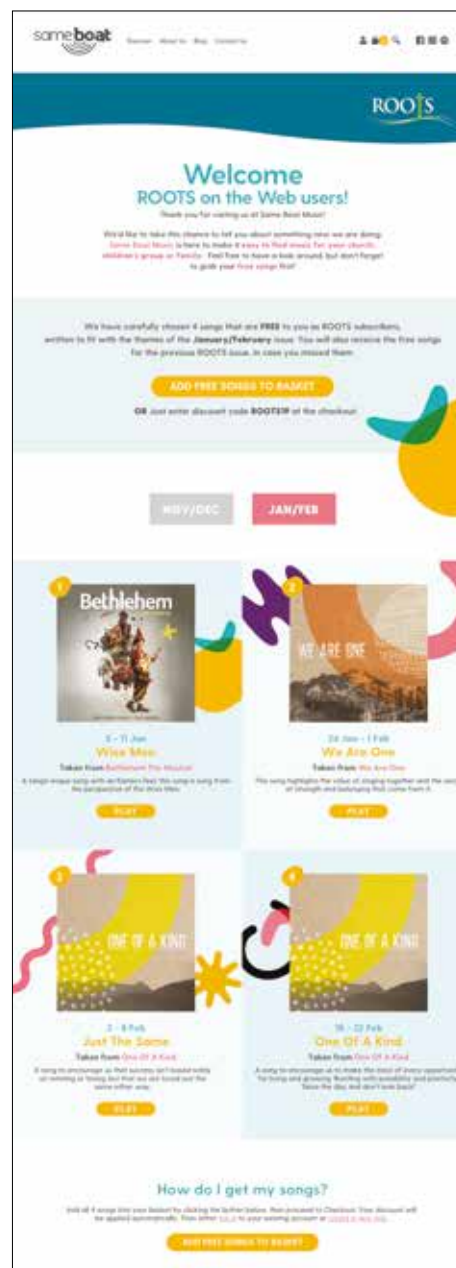
Q What has been the reaction from various church groups in terms of what Same Boat Music is seeking to offer and achieve?

Mark: We’ve had lots of great conversations with a number of church leaders and influencers. We’ve been very encouraged by the responses from the various groups, who all seem to be

saying the same thing to us. There is a strongly shared appetite for relevant, engaging and enjoyable content, for children and all generations to sing – not just on a Sunday, but for mid-week meetings for ‘unchurched’ children, and at home together. It’s been really reassuring that what we can provide seems to be exactly what churches are telling us they are looking for. We’ve been told there’s a need for more than just ‘happy-clappy-action-praisy’ songs (nothing wrong with those), but a range of songs that embrace broader themes of self-worth, well-being, community, etc. In other words, the very varied type of ‘animals’ we’ve been storing up in the Ark for a good few years.

Q What are you working on next?

Mark: We’re currently in the middle of a new assembly song series for schools – with a specific focus on helping facilitate collective worship in assemblies. And we’re looking forward to writing new songs exclusive to Same Boat Music. There’s massive scope for us to write real solid biblical content – Sunday school curriculum songs and intergenerational worship material. What else are we working on? Getting a day off would be lovely!



Welcome to Same Boat Music's new web page. Here is what you will see as a ROOTS user to access your four free songs each issue.