

EPISODE 228

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 228 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us again this week. Teaching positive messages to our kids is important but often times today, it may seem difficult to find ways to do that. However, two musically inclined, lifelong friends are making it easier for us.

After becoming parents themselves. Anne Monotone and Jennifer Cook used music as a way to teach and explain things to their children. They created the singing duo, Again again and their debut full length album, *Listen, Love, Repeat*, is filled with positive family friendly messaging for our time. They sat down with me to talk about their music, their message and why parents are embracing it.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:45.4] PF: Anne and Jenifer, welcome to Live Happy Now.

[0:00:48.5] JC: Thank you.

[0:00:48.1] AM: Thanks for having us.

[0:00:49.7] PF: Yeah, this is going to be a lot of fun because you're doing something that's very different and very fun. You're using music to teach kids a really positive lesson. That's something I love, we've talked a lot about music and how powerful it is here at live happy now. The fact that you're doing it for children is a great thing. I guess to start, I wanted to find out how the two of you met.

[0:01:11.9] AM: Sure. Well thank you so much. Yeah, this is Anne, Jen and I actually met during our first week of our freshman year at Occidental College, here in Los Angeles. We ended up having musical theatre, you know, classes and things together and so yeah, we've been friends for a very long time.

[0:01:33.8] JC: Yeah, we were both music people so we always tended to bond over music events and musical theatre and concerts.

[0:01:43.9] PF: Were both of you performing?

[0:01:46.7] AM: I did some coffee houses at school but really, was performance in theatre and then later in our early 20s, we made a band called Elephonic, it was an electronic band and we actually did play out a lot and do festivals and that was fun.

[0:02:04.2] AM: Yeah, this is Anne. Exactly, we were in a musical production of company, I remember that was a lot of fun in college but just like Jen said, we started a band soon after we graduated and that really gave us a huge experience of DIY, doing it yourself music in Los Angeles, not knowing what we were doing and just making it up as we went along and we had a lot of fun doing that.

[0:02:32.6] JC: This is Jen, it also gave us a chance to know how we work well together and not be scared to do it again later in life.

[0:02:41.2] PF: How long has it been since that happened and now you've come around and started again?

[0:02:47.7] JC: Over a decade, definitely over a decade.

[0:02:51.0] PF: So how did you circle back and come back and start doing Again Again and it's a completely different kind of music.

[0:02:59.6] JC: This is Jen, Anne called me up and asked if I wanted to write kid's music with her. We both had little ones at the time.

[0:03:06.3] AM: Exactly. This is Anne. I was starting to get, which I'm sure many parents do, especially with new little ones, getting kind of the burnout from all the kid's music that I was listening to at the time.

[0:03:20.8] PF: A little kid's bop overload there?

[0:03:22.6] AM: Yeah, just a little bit. And you know, when my son was old enough, you know, maybe two or three-ish. To request bedtime songs, he would ask for crazy combinations. One of the songs actually was dinosaur party that I made up one night and then he asked for it again the next night and asked for it again the next night and I was like, well, I guess I should write it down because he's calling me out on the fact that the melody's a little different and the words are a little different.

[0:03:53.0] PF: It's improv son.

[0:03:55.2] AM: It was a little improve dinosaur party. Just what Jen said, I called her up one day and just was like, I know you're doing music still, you've got a daughter, I've got a son, let's figure this out and do something so –

[0:04:08.3] JC: Right, this is Jen, I was teaching school at that time and I was supplementing my lessons with music and a lot of times, I would check out iTunes or YouTube and look for stuff that I could use to supplement the lessons and sometimes I would come up empty so I would end up writing my own thing for that lesson. And so I was kind of doing Anne was doing just making it work, you know? Creating music on the spot for what was needed at that moment.

[0:04:37.9] AM: Right. In the class room.

[0:04:38.9] PF: And then it go from being something that you two were just doing to being, oh you have an album coming out and it's a thing?

[0:04:49.5] AM: Year, this is Anne. It took a while, I will say, just because you know, being working moms and you know, being busy and all of that so we just started making time for songwriting and we just made sure that each week, we had a new song that we were finishing it and getting back into okay, working with producers, okay, how are we doing this? This is new, this is fun, you know, we decided, let's do 10 songs and once we had those 10 songs done, we were like, okay, let's do the next thing which is put it together and put it out and –

The cool thing about this project I will say is that we also have a corresponding music and coloring book that goes with it. So we have lyrics for each song and an illustration for each song, kind of put together as a coloring book. We have a fun package to get out into the world.

[0:05:45.2] PF: Yeah, that's a really different approach, I was going to ask you, how you came up with that and what the purpose of doing that was?

[0:05:50.8] JC: This is Jen — we have a lot of artist friends and Anne thought, why don't we actually make this something that reaches further than just push play for three minutes and we're done. If this lesson is important to us and we want this lesson to really reach the child, we should try and figure out a way to get it into a literary form and so this way, I, as a teacher at the time could take it to school and read it to the kids and then turn it into something longer than just push play. Here's a song, how cool, we're done.

It's now elongated and now, the children are coloring the page that corresponds with the lyrics and we're discussing it in long form rather than just a quick listen.

[0:06:45.8] PF: How does that help them engage more with it? Does it make it resonate better and they understand it more or – how...?

[0:06:52.2] JC: It definitely causes a moment for discussion so that it goes a little bit longer than just to listen. It's more interactive because now, we get to talk about it rather than just hear it.

[0:07:05.6] AM: Right, this is Anne. Also I think, for the readers, it also allows for kids who are reading, learning to read, you know, to follow along with the words as they're hearing it and then also, just then to get creative in color. I think just as a package is just something really exciting and you know, hadn't really seen that out in the world. I'm glad that we're able to get it there.

[0:07:31.7] PF: It's not just your presentation that's progressive, your themes are really progressive for kid's music. I guess, first of all, can you talk about some of the positive messages that you're delivering with your music and then tell us why it was so important for you to bring those themes out?

[0:07:47.6] JC: Sure, this is Jen. Actually, my daughter, her best friend goes to a different school and one of their buddies at school at my daughter's friend's school has two moms and they made up stories about it, they didn't know that concept, it was such a new concept to them that they started to chatter about it.

Like "Oh, aybe the dads died," or you know, maybe there was never – they just kind of were reaching in the wrong direction, not necessarily the wrong direction, they were trying to figure it out and so we thought we would help them out with a song about families that come in different ways.

Families that aren't that TV structure of mom, dad, brother, sister. In this song, it's kind of like a Brazilian rap and you've got families with two dads or two moms or just one parent or maybe the parent is a grandmother. Right now, I'm fostering a child, my family's fostering a child and that family dynamic is something to honor, it's not necessarily a child that is biologically yours, that makes a family. It's a family when it's a loving unit altogether.

[0:09:02.3] AM: This is Anne. You know, I think what's important, one of our main focus is for Again Again is to sing songs that help build conversations on important topics. You know, we really want to inspire kids and families and spark loving conversations. We kind of always want to make sure that there's love included so if we're sparking this conversations about real topics within families and within our communities, you know, I think we've done something really special.

So as Jen mentioned, we have the song, Wrap Your Arms Around Your Family, which is about all the different combinations that you can have that makes a family. We also have a song called Be Well, that is about being good to your sick friends, you know? If you're the sick friend, you can still be a good friend in return.

Also, an important one, camping, we sing about cleaning up and making sure that we're being kind to the planet which of course is a huge issue right now.

[0:09:58.5] PF: Absolutely. By instilling it through music, how does that help it maybe train their brain a little bit better with the message because I think music is such a fabulous teacher and

can you – especially Jen, you’ve got an education background, you understand how does this help it, help the kids learn it better.

[0:10:18.5] JC: This is Jen, yeah. I appreciate and I agree with what you’re saying about how music helps teach. I’ve always found it personally easier to learn through song. I always memorized phone numbers as a tune or a rap and you know, I taught multiplication through a rap and spelling words through a rap.

So, it definitely helps instil just kind of – if there’s a good line in the song then it definitely embeds itself into the mind of the child because it’s easier to remember than a lecture. We don’t want to be lecturing but we definitely want a summary message of what we’re trying to say to have a place in the kid’s mind.

[0:11:06.7] PF: Sure, if you can give them like a good positive heirloom that’s going to stay in their head for all day, I mean, what a great gift?

[0:11:14.8] AM: Absolutely, you know, this is Anne. I think kind of where our band name comes from, Again Again, when a kid wants something again, they’re going to ask, again, again, again.

[0:11:29.0] PF: I was going to ask where that came from, that’s fantastic.

[0:11:31.7] AM: Absolutely and I think you know our intention was truly to make songs that parents will like listening to as well, being parents ourselves. So if we are able to have a song, you know we have a song called Get Dressed March, which is super fun and you know if parents can sing along to encourage their children to get dressed by themselves, great let’s do it you know?

[0:11:56.4] PF: Well I was going to actually ask about that because I think there is a lot of adults that probably need that in the morning.

[0:12:02.5] JC: Right, I guess we should have added a line about coffee, get your coffee.

[0:12:07.6] PF: Yeah if you want to do an adult version because you know there are a lot of days where –

[0:12:14.0] AM: We'll add that to the list for the second release.

[0:12:17.4] PF: So how do you come up with your songs? What is your process? Do you look at situations or is it personal interactions? What most inspires you?

[0:12:27.4] JC: This is Jen. I will start with Anne's family is very blended. My family is very blended and sometimes our friends say, "Wow it would be great if there was a song about blended families," and then that's it. We'll start writing a song about that. Where there is a need, we want to try and cover it. We're a baby band so we are still collecting ideas and suggestions. Definitely any of your listeners out there we would love to hear what you have in mind for our next release.

Like gender equality or being the boss of your own body or transgender friends or your handicapped friends or anti-bullying, loss of a family member on and on. There is so many tough issues out there that really need some time.

[0:13:15.6] AM: Yeah, this is Anne and I think Jen probably has a million text from me kind of my process in a lot of ways will be if I am listening to the news, if I am having a conversation, if I am seeing something out in the world and then a little idea will spark and then I will just send Jen a text, "Hey song subject," you know, whatever. It might be I know my son was taking a bath and my husband was doing a silly character, Captain Bubble Beard but it was like, "Oh that is a fun idea. Let us do a song for bath time," you know? So inspiration really comes from everywhere and just in our lives and the world around us.

[0:13:53.0] PF: And how do you keep it from being – I am not trying to put down children's music, how do you keep it from being annoying after 83 listens?

[0:14:00.6] JC: I think anything after 83 listens is going to be annoying but we definitely have a good production team and we start with a solid melody and good lyrics and then we say, "You know what for this one we think it might be cool if it was beetle-esque can we try for that?" Or for this one, it would be great if it was kind of a rap where there was a call and response and so we're trying to not be kind of "There was a farmer had a dog and Bingo..." just a little more sophisticated because I think kids can handle that.

[0:14:37.7] AM: Absolutely. This is Anne and you know I think that as Jen said, we have different tunes. Each song is its own thing so we are not stuck to one genre. You know the genre is children's music, which is so broad. So I think for us to really be able to take each song as its own entity and create around that brings so much variety into our music as well.

[0:15:02.7] PF: So you are not locked into this is our style like we're reggae all the way. You can really diversify throughout.

[0:15:10.4] AM: Exactly, yeah.

[0:15:12.2] PF: And I love that you have such different themes and different styles of music and how does that fit with the way that today's kids are being raised? Because our world is diverse. It is ever changing, so how does music like yours help support that?

[0:15:27.5] JC: Well this is Jen and I grew up as a California girl. I definitely was scared about running out of water and you know the draughts, the many draughts taught us how to conserve and that was that. That was it. We just learned some tips like don't flush so much, don't take such long showers but nowadays, we have so much more information and everything is so global now we were so connected and we know so much more than we used to all the time.

And with role models like Greta Thunberg from Sweden who speaks to congress about how it's not just about conservation, it is about just plain survival. For today's kids I feel like it is just much more serious. So for example my kid marched on Friday with her sign about climate change and climate justice and we didn't have that when we were kids. It is just much more in your face and there is a lot more anxiety about everything going on in the world.

Anne and I were talking about I mean I will be honest with you, at this precise moment my husband is staked out at the donut shop watching a soft lockdown going on at my daughter's school at this precise moment and it is the third one this year. So it is a scary world right now.

[0:16:49.3] AM: This is Anne and exactly. I mean of course as adults we have our own anxieties about everything going on and we don't want our kids to be feeling that as well. So I feel like our music can help families and create conversations. Just going back to Jen saying

growing up in California. I grew up in Oregon, up in Portland and of course maybe when I was a kid, I was worried about acid rain from watching a movie or something but you know it seemed like probably we're so far away.

You know so far off in the distant future, but we are now living it. So you know with the fact that we are being globally connected now, there is social media, the internet, everything, we just have so much information all the time. So I feel and we feel that Again Again can be the resource to bring people together through song. You know, we want to build the children's confidence and learn how to respect differences and learn how to be kind and be a leader and you don't have to be a grownup to be a leader. You can be a leader in your classroom so we want to support families, yeah.

[0:17:58.5] PF: I love that — and then that message as you kind of touched on earlier as the child absorbs it and he is sharing it and he is singing that song, it resonates with the rest of the family as well and you know there is a lot of parents, like you said we are anxious too. There is a lot of stuff going on and nobody wants to transfer that to their child but it is inevitable. So I think it's cool that you're providing tools that maybe the child can help sway some of the anxiety of their parents.

[0:18:24.6] AM: Yeah.

[0:18:26.2] JC: I agree. I mean ultimately Again Again's message is love and we definitely want kids to feel the love and we want them to feel like they matter and that someone is listening.

[0:18:39.9] PF: That's terrific, yeah. Do each of you have favorite songs either on the album or that you have written since then?

[0:18:45.6] JC: Ooh that is a good one. I am really liking a song that is going to be coming out on our next release about being a boss of your own body.

[0:18:54.9] PF: Thank you for that.

[0:18:57.1] AM: Yeah that is a good one. This is Anne — let's see from our current release that is coming up October 18th. So let's see, you know one of the songs on here is called Bubble

Gum and Cheese and this one is about using your imagination and you don't have to be bored, use your imagination. We have a lot of fun combinations of things in the song but I think what's special about it is that my oldest brother, Jay, actually helped write it.

He wrote the original version, which was more for grownups and then with his permission, we changed it up so it is kid friendly and it is super family friendly and super fun. So I really love that one.

[0:19:38.5] JC: I think another one of my favorites is Families Come in Blended Ways, because and Anne, I will be honest with you, every time we perform that live I get a little chocked up at the end of the song. I don't know if you have ever noticed that but we make a rainbow when we all hold hands and love is the glue.

[0:19:59.2] AM: Yeah, it is beautiful.

[0:20:01.2] PF: That is terrific and you know I love that you are instilling children with this because that is a message that they will get to keep with them as they grow up and I can't think of a better time for us to be getting such positive messages to our children.

[0:20:14.5] AM: Thank you.

[0:20:14.5] JC: Thanks.

[0:20:16.1] PF: So what is it that you most want to see happen as a result of your music?

[0:20:19.5] JC: I will answer that a little bit. This is Jen and Paula, I really appreciate you asking that because that is something that when we started writing, we already had a mission but we also didn't want to lecture and so some of our songs are just plain fun because we didn't want the album to be a serious topic after serious topic but in the end, we hope to help the child build confidence and like Anne said before, we want to teach kids to respect differences, to be kind and to show care.

[0:20:52.2] AM: Yeah and you know for us to hear our music out in the world, you know of course that would be amazing. So cool that's great too but as Jen said, I mean it is ultimately like how can we support families in raising children in our world today.

[0:21:10.5] PF: That's terrific. Well we're going to come back in a couple of seconds and tell them where they can go to get more information about you, about your new album that is coming on October 18th, and we're also going to give them a link to one of your coloring book pages so they can download that and get busy with it. So thank you for taking the time to come on the show. This is such a fantastic project. As soon as I have gotten an email about I knew that you would be perfect to come on and let our listeners know what you got going on.

[0:21:39.9] JC: Thanks Paula.

[0:21:40.8] AM: Thank you so much.

[0:21:41.5] PF: All right, you have a wonderful day and we'll look for your album very soon.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:21:41.5] PF: That was Anne Montone and Jennifer Cook, who perform under the name Again Again. If you like to learn more about their music and their new album, *Listen, Love, Repeat*, please visit us at livehappynow.com and we'll give you links and more information.

We hope that you are already a subscriber to Live Happy Now but if you are not, you can find us on the Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, SoundCloud, Stitcher and iTunes and on Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform, and hit subscribe so you will never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week. We'll meet you here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felts reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]