

SINGING MY HEART OUT

Community choirs are more than just a gathering of voices, they can lead to a real sense of belonging, personal triumph and joy



Real connection: Jay Turner and Cath Mundy are the driving force behind the community choir With One Voice. Picture: Anthony Weate

MIKE BRUCE

I'm cycling through Brisbane city when a friend calls.

"What's goin' on?" he asks.

"Just off to choir," I say.

It was as if I'd just declared: "I'm off to quilting circle, or cross-dressing club."

"You. Are. In. A. Choir? You never told me you can sing."

"I can't. But, you see, it's not about singing ability, it's about ... oh, never mind."

There wasn't time to explain how I had joined a choir as a journalistic project, but how the project had soon turned to a love affair. Or how, like all fresh romances, my 75 minutes a week at choir tumbles past agonisingly quickly, and when we part I pine for choir and long to be back in its loving embrace. It would take him too long to grasp. Until you have been in a choir, its allure remains for most people a puzzle.

My brief was to "join" Brisbane's newest community choir, With One Voice (WOV), and see from the inside what it is about song – its enigmatic power to evoke joy and sadness; the language of the soul and pure expression of emotion; why decades on, people still weep at a Paris grave or a Memphis mansion for men they know only in voice.

It begins on an evening in early-April with journalistic detachment. Scepticism even. My fear of singing borders on the pathological, stemming from a defining moment from the back row of a primary school choir in 1973 when a nine-year-old Patrick Fox told me: "You're not singing. You're talking". The thought embeds itself and forever after I mumble my way through national anthems, church services and funerals, fearful of being heard.

Tonight, 41 years on, I'm standing among 60 strangers laughing like a kookaburra, blowing bubbles with my lips, shaking limbs and gyrating hips like I'm on a Byron Bay rebirthing retreat. It's the warm-up. By comparison, singing should be a breeze.

Come along my friends/Come along/Get aboard and ride this train/Nothing on this train to lose/Everything to gain.

Cath Mundy is choir director. Mundy's a singing powerhouse, a shining soul with a perpetual smile and monumental energy, who leads three community choirs. She and husband Jay Turner, a tall, angular Englishman, form the singing/songwriting duo Mundy-Turner, and one half of a band. They are, to these eyes at least, ridiculously talented – guitar, violin, piano and knockout voices.

There is no audition for WOV. As Mundy notes: "It's a soft and nurturing environment here. No one is going to judge you".

Brilliant. Here I can blend into this crowd the way a larger, poorly co-ordinated boy might blend into a rugby team, playing prop and lumbering from ruck to ruck – yet still part of a team. Here I can hide and be dragged along in their slipstream of talent and be but a small part of a large and wondrous symphony.

Several choir members can really sing, and I am in awe of them. But like most community choirs, most members do not consider themselves singers. Just voices. Attitude, not ability. People come in many types with myriad motives and interesting stories.

There are backpackers from the Czech Republic and Germany, who come to meet locals against the backdrop of music. Many like to sing, but don't want to attend church. Many have wanted to sing for some time, but didn't want to join an established choir. One chap who comes for the first few weeks and sits quietly in the back row, I later learn, has an autistic son and finds singing one of the most effective means of connecting with him.



There's Shaun Conway-Soso, 28, who was hit by a car when crossing the street after State of Origin four years ago. Conway-Soso, who was studying sports management and business at the time, suffered a brain injury that affected his motor skills, speech and cognition. He saw some of his mates slowly drift out of his life. Choir has become a welcome, new social circle.

For Nadia, 40, and Ali Matin, 45, choirs have brought belonging in a new home. Both electrical engineers from Iran, they settled in Beenleigh, south of Brisbane, with children Ava, 11, and Ealya, 8, in late-2011. They arrived with some clothes, camping mats, no friends and hearts full of hope.

They'd grown uneasy about Iran's rising fundamentalism and opted for adventure over acquiescence. Soon after arriving, Ali stumbled across Mixed Beans, Mundy's multicultural choir at the Beenleigh Library, and spontaneously joined in. Neither had sung in choirs before, but Ali brought Nadia and the children along the next week, setting off a cascade of connections, largely with Mundy and Turner and another couple, John and Cherie, who helped them settle in with advice, hospitality, furniture and lifts before they bought their own car.

"We found people unusually kind and friendly," Nadia Matin says. "As a migrant, many things are challenging like language, connecting, dealing with new rules and regulations, but they helped us navigate our way in our new home." When they moved from Beenleigh to Aspley, the family joined WOV where they forged more connections, and Nadia discovered an unexpected layer to choir.

When Mundy asked her to sing a Persian folk song in her native Farsi one evening, she says she was white with fear (women are

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Community in tune: Cath Mundy leads the choir in rehearsal; Nadia and Ali Matin with their children Ealya and Ava; and (inset) Michael Campbell. Pictures: Anthony Weate

banned from singing publicly in Iran). "But I saw Ava sitting there and I realised I had to be a positive role model to her, a young woman, to show her to have courage."

Nadia says choirs have not only proved a practical support by easing their settlement, but encouraged her to free herself sufficiently to "sing from the heart".

Michael Campbell, 61, of Teneriffe, is a symbol of the recurring theme of choirs.

"I was 12 and we were practising Christmas carols when the teacher put his ear to my mouth and said 'shut up Campbell'," he recalls.

"I shut up for almost 50 years, thinking I never would sing again."

He avoided anything that involved song. He mouthed his way through church, yet all those years, the desire to sing niggled away at him. The former army officer joined WOV on day one and in 19 weeks hasn't missed a session.

The notion of a team, a new group of the uninitiated coming together with supportive, non-judgmental mentors has been the catalyst to a newfound confidence.

"I felt comfortable immediately ... it's given me confidence and so I not only sing here, but sing anywhere without hesitation," he says.

Campbell is one of the 85 per cent of people who are told at some time that they cannot sing, according to Tania de Jong, who founded WOV in Melbourne in 2008.

Brisbane is the 15th WOV choir born under the auspices of Creativity Australia. De Jong had watched the incredible resonance of homeless choir, The Choir of Hard Knocks, and saw an opportunity for choirs to foster inclusion through an added dimension.

"I thought why not try a different approach, combining the disadvantaged and homeless and bring them together with lawyers, doctors, students and executives to create mentoring partnerships, so a CEO could be singing alongside the cleaner," she says.

Choirs can ignite "positive human collisions", in which we meet people from different walks of life "who challenge your perceptions", she says.

De Jong did a 2013 TED Talk about the neuroscience of singing, about how it stretches the brain, alleviates stress, breeds compassion, releases endorphins and produces oxytocin, the chemical of love. When people sing together, the effect is amplified. Choirs are also a chance for real connection. After each WOV, our Wish List is read. It might be as simple as a lift home, advice, music lessons or something to give away. After Wish List comes a free supper delivered by food-rescue group OzHarvest.

When people ask me why the job became a love affair, it's hard to define. Just like choir itself, the joy is greater than the sum of its parts. Satisfaction of creation through teamwork. The rare opportunity for real connection in a world of Facebook and Snapchat. Meeting a fear head-on. Testing your limits. Having the crappiest day at work erased by an hour of singing.

In the documentary *20 Feet From Stardom* about backing singers, singer Lisa Fischer says it best: "I am love with melodies. I am in love with the sound vibration and what it does with other people, it's familiar but it's so special and you are just so happy when you get there. And you try and stay there for as long as you can."

And I will.

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Hear WOV, ABC 612, August 29, 7pm