

Earth, Wind and Choir

Katherine Smyrk is the voice, and she's trying to understand it!
She discovers the magic of song and the power of community in choir.

IT'S A BLUSTERY Tuesday evening; the muggy wind whips pollen around like drifts of snow. But inside Scot's Church it is cool. A little hushed, too, in the way that churches usually are. But that will soon change; the acoustics put to good use. Tuesday is rehearsal night for the Melbourne With One Voice choir.

Annabel meets me at the door. She has been a part of the choir for almost five years. She whips around the room on elbow crutches, marking down the names of those attending, arranging rows of chairs, ensuring conductor Anthony Barnhill has everything he needs.

Beth arrives soon after me, zooming in on her wheelchair with a grin. Born with cerebral palsy, Beth has low mobility. She explains that she used to be brought to choir by her aunty, but now she comes on her own, via taxi.

"This is something I can do by myself," she says proudly. "I love being part of a group. I belong here. At choir no-one sees my wheelchair." When I ask her how singing makes her feel, she almost shouts, "AMAZING."

It was just over a decade ago that the idea of a community choir really came into the Australian consciousness through an ABC TV documentary about the Choir of Hard Knocks. Run by conductor and opera singer Jonathon Welch, the choir brought together people

who had experienced disadvantage and homelessness, and showed them that they could make something beautiful. A number of Melbourne *Big Issue* vendors were involved, eventually taking the stage at Sydney Opera House.

"The documentary helped us to see the choir members as real people with hopes and dreams, just like you and me," says Welch, who has continued to create other community choirs, including a group called Voices Without Borders with refugee and migrant support group AMES.

"We saw that everyone wants the opportunity to feel acknowledged and valued and in return also wants to make a contribution back to the world. Through the choir, they were able to do this with their beautiful voices."

The program inspired Perth musician Bernard Carney to start a choir with *Big Issue* vendors in his city. Called Spirit of the Streets, it has been going for 11 years, but is expanded to anyone who, as Carney puts it, "felt they didn't fit into society". Steve W has been a part of the choir for 10 years, the same length of time he has sold *The Big Issue*, and performed at an enormous show the choir did at Perth Concert Hall.

"That was absolutely awesome, it was just really fantastic to stand up on stage in front of thousands of people," he says.

"It was definitely really special." When he talks about the choir, he can't stop saying the word "fantastic".

"We have a great time, we have a bit of a laugh, you know?" he says. "I love going to choir. We go out and meet people in the area, and I have made a lot of friends. It's just fantastic."

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BACK AT SCOT'S Church, we're getting down to business. I sit in the alto section with Annabel and others. There's a woman in a Royal Botanic Garden Uniform who has obviously come straight from work.

Started in 2008 by social entrepreneur and soprano Tania de Jong, With One Voice is a community choir program now adopted around the country. Each choir is led by a professional conductor, and brings both privileged and underprivileged people together to sing.

"If you come together with people, you realise that we have so much in common. And there really is no us and them. It's all us," says de Jong.

We do a big deep breath in together – young and old, employed and unemployed, people in wheelchairs, people in expensive suits – breathing out together with a sigh. We launch into warm-up exercises of tongue twisters:

"My mum makes me mash my mini M&Ms on a Monday morning oo ah."

Next we sing 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight', Anthony playing along on an electric keyboard. When we properly get going, he flourishes on the keys so enthusiastically that it rocks from side to side on the wooden floor.

"Gorgeous!" he shouts at the end of the song.

We run through 'What a Wonderful World' and then 'I Am Australian'.

A woman with long red hair stands up and leads us through the Auslan lyrics. Three-part harmonies reverberate throughout the rafters like angels.

In a break Monica, an IT project manager who works in an office nearby, tells me why she's a part of the choir.

"It's like an escape for me. Life gets so busy, work and home, I have a three-year-old..." she explains. "But when you come to choir, when you start singing, it's a release. You forget about the world."

"Singing is a feelgood drug," adds Annabel as she passes by. "It's my drug of choice. I get such a high after singing." She then earnestly assures me that she doesn't do drugs.

Every person I speak to points to scientific evidence that singing is good for you. Tania de Jong has a whole TedTalk on the subject. Jonathon Welch informs me that in the UK doctors are prescribing singing in choirs to patients who are suffering from depression.

Singing does release endorphins, and increases oxytocin, which is the hormone associated with love, trust and bonding. A study from the Royal College of Music London has shown that singing in a group also significantly reduces the stress hormone cortisol. Research conducted with a Frankfurt choir found that singing together produced antibodies in the blood.

Once we've finished our singing for the evening, Annabel talks about the Wishlist, something that happens at every session of With One Voice, where members can put in a wish, and other members try to grant it for them.

Monica asked for advice about the best place to get music lessons for her child. Beth wished that she would be able to stand up for the first time and, two years ago, she did – at rehearsal, in front of everyone.

Annabel used the Wishlist when she first started. She had been unemployed for six years, and asked for help finding a job. Someone in the choir was working in recruitment, and offered to look at her resume. Eventually, after being fired suddenly from a call-centre job, she got

makes the messages that we sing more powerful." There is a choir project called Remini-Sing that is operating in nursing homes around the country, to boost wellbeing for people with dementia and their families. There's the Beyond the Bathroom choir, which takes over the dining room of my local pub once a week, the Men's Shed Chorale, the Sydney Atheist Choir, Women with Latitude, Melbourne Gay Men's Chorus, Burundi Peace Choir, the Australian Military Wives Choir, Phoenix Voices of Youth Choir, the Birraleek Blokes, WomanSong. The list could go on forever.

Jonathon Welch points to the fact that humans really are pack animals.

"We are programmed to want to connect and communicate with

"If you come together with people, you realise that we have so much in common. And there really is no us and them. It's all us."

an ongoing role as an admin assistant.

"The Tuesday after I was sacked from my call-centre job, I came to choir really distraught. I couldn't stop crying. Everyone crowded around me in a circle and sang 'Lean on Me'. Now, even to this day, I can't hear 'Lean on Me' without crying," she says. "The choir is like a second family."

Once you start looking out for choirs, they are everywhere. I speak to Ci'Allah, a 12-year-old member of the Marliya choir, an all-girl offshoot of the Gondwana Indigenous Children's Choir. They recently recorded a song with rapper Briggs about Aboriginal deaths in custody. "We're pretty much like sisters," Ci'Allah tells me of the other girls in Marliya. "It's good for us to sing together as a group, because I feel like it

each other, and choirs create these musical 'villages'."

When rehearsal is over, everyone stands around and chats, shares some supper that has been laid out on trestle tables. People are laughing, some still humming. As I stand and watch them I think of something Tania said to me earlier: "That's what people are aching for. Community."

» *Katherine Smyrk (@KSmyrk) is the Deputy Editor of The Big Issue.*

» *Find out more about With One Voice at creativityaustralia.org.au and Spirit of the Streets at spiritofthestreetschoir.org.au. Spinifex Gum featuring Marliya from Gondwana Choirs will be at Sydney Festival on 25 January 2019, sydneyfestival.org.au.*

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL VIZZARI

