

# When hitting the right note can change lives

With her charity Creativity Australia, soprano Tania de Jong is showcasing how the simple act of singing with others can heal broken spirits – and perhaps even save lives

When I was 14, my best friend told me I shouldn't bother having singing lessons. I believed her – she was my best friend, after all – even though I had always wanted to have singing lessons and become a singer. I was the girl always singing the church hymns loudly (although I'm Jewish).

Three years after that advice, I auditioned for the chorus of the school musical *Oklahoma!* and got the lead role. That was a defining moment in my life.

As human beings, we remember negative things, and they become bigger than they should be. We feel insecure and question our own abilities. It is estimated that up to 85 per cent of people in Western society have been told at some stage that they can't sing. This is a tragedy when you think about how important singing is, not only for our brains, but to be able to come together and share our voices.

We can all sing. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. I believe singing is a super wonder drug. When we sing with other people, in particular, the right central lobe of our brain fires up, making us smarter, healthier, happier and more creative. We improve our memory, language and concentration. Our hearts even start to beat together.

Singing connects you to the present moment, it connects you to others, and it enhances your brain's neuroplasticity, which means it helps you to heal from trauma, abuse and whatever hardship you're going through. Singing in a choir weekly is like a weekly therapy session. Except a lot cheaper!

As the founder of Creativity Australia, I work with a range of marginalised

individuals and communities to build supportive networks through our With One Voice choir social inclusion programs. It's about removing the Us and Them. There is a growing sense of division in society; more loneliness, social isolation, depression and anxiety. When you come together and bridge that gap between haves and have-nots, between the fortunate and less fortunate, between CEOs and the unemployed, we start to become one voice.

There are hundreds of participants in our program whose lives have been changed, and indeed saved, by singing. One story springs to mind – there was an older lady who had gone through a very bad separation and wasn't allowed to talk to her grandchildren. She came to choir and didn't actually say a word for weeks. You could see she'd been crying continuously. Then

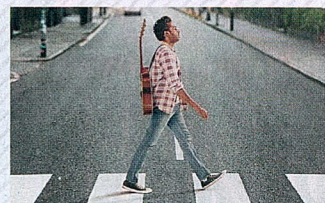
she got a voluntary role in the choir and joined the choir committee. She started to tell jokes and laugh, and she found a really good friend in the choir.

One day she confided to me that she had been storing up all her sleeping pill packages to keep for the day when she would end her life. But now that she had her "choir family", those pills were going down the toilet. I can't describe how hearing that made me feel. I'm just grateful everything turned out OK.

So don't listen to anyone when they tell you not to take those singing lessons or join the choir. Singing is one of life's great joys, and you deserve to be heard. ★ Creativity Australia's With One Voice choir programs take place in 22 locations around Australia. Visit [creativityaustralia.org.au](http://creativityaustralia.org.au).



★  
STELLAR  
PICKS  
THINGS TO TRY  
this week



WATCH

What if the world forgot The Beatles existed? A struggling musician performing the record-breaking band's covers is about to find out, as his career skyrockets to the top. **YESTERDAY**, starring Himesh Patel and Lily James, is in cinemas from Thursday.



READ

A mother speaks of her daughter's anorexia. A sister tells of being hated by her sibling. **THE SUNDAY STORY CLUB** collection of real-life stories by Doris Brett and Kerry Cue reminds us of the power of conversation. On sale Tuesday, \$32.99; [panmacmillan.com.au](http://panmacmillan.com.au).



EXPERIENCE

Wednesday nights in Melbourne are heating up with the Queen Victoria Market's **WINTER NIGHT MARKETS**. This season's food and drink traders feature returning favourites plus fresh, new offerings. Until August 28, entry is free; [thenightmarket.com.au](http://thenightmarket.com.au).