

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN

PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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By Keith McDonald

It's The Real Sing

There's nothing as soul-stirring as the sound of a big crowd in full song. Think of the singing of the national anthem after Cathy Freeman had received her gold medal at the Sydney Olympics. Or the singing of a Welsh rugby crowd. But we tend to admire these moments from afar and Martin Meader, who has four community choirs in Perth, says that, basically, singing embarrasses us.

"In our culture we hear someone singing and we get embarrassed," he said.

While in other cultures, people sing as naturally as they breathe, we suppress the natural exuberance of song.

"We are viewers of stuff, not participators," said Mr. Meader. "We want to watch the AFL or someone perform a great song, but not do it ourselves."

Another choir director, Jenny Simpson, agrees. Too many people sat passively at home in front of the TV, she said. "People aren't talking to each other."

But it seems we're starting to find our voice. Community choirs are springing up everywhere. Voice Moves, the umbrella organisation, has 60 Western Australian choirs, affiliated. You don't need any musical ability to join and many have modern pop repertoires - -- more like pub singalong than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Some are more specialised. These include the Band of Angels gospel choir, the Gay and Lesbian Choir and Perth Chinese Voices. All have stories of people who have been transformed by the experience of singing.

Mr. Meader, a Fremantle musician and film-maker, remembers a woman who would sit with her head bowed and wouldn't sing. Gradually, he coaxed a little more out of her.



"Then, six months later, I asked her to do a solo and it turned out she had the most incredible voice," Mr. Meader recalled. "If you closed your eyes, you would have thought it was a 20-year-old woman, not a 75-year-old."

Mr. Meader started his first choir seven years ago in the slipstream of Paradise Road, the movie which he co-wrote and for which he was co-executive producer.

"I was waiting for the film to happen and to get paid," he said. "My wife said I needed a paying job and in two weeks three people came up to me and said, 'I hear you are starting a choir'."

He had no such plan and was taken aback. Nevertheless, it sounded like a good idea and so he set up The Real Sing.

It was a huge success, spawning three Sing From The Heart choirs in Victoria Park, Rockingham and Mosman Park.

Now The Real Sing has 36 members and is semi-professional. Sing From The Heart has 160 members, each paying \$8 to attend the weekly rehearsals. They do concerts and have Soup and Song evenings every Friday at Maylands train station.

The style varies between the choirs. Mosman Park is an older group doing 40's, 50's and Australiana; Victoria Park does baby-boomer music.

Mr. Meader believes people are at their finest when they sing. "You can see it in their eyes," he said. "It's people going beyond themselves."

"If you have been through grief, it gives you a feeling of belonging with people," he said. "It gives men an opportunity to talk and that's important. Men talk but not in the same way as women. A lot of men hide things inside and by doing that they shorten their lives.

"A choir is an awesome experience. It becomes very emotional. Men don't want to share their emotions and they have to break down those barriers."

For public servant Kel Fowler, the Sing From The Heart choir has been his only real creative outlet. He was hooked from the very start when he went along with a friend.

"It's such a great feeling," he said. "As a public servant, I lead a fairly dull life. but these harmonies in the choir make me feel like I am in heaven.