

# THE WEST AUSTRALIAN

## PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

By Bron Sibree

### Raising the rafters

For some time now, they've been coming in droves. Young and old; doctors and housewives; lawyers, store-packers and shop assistants. People who defy demographic definition, flocking into community halls, churches, clubs and pubs across Australia.

They come to sing --- gospel, jazz, Romanian folk songs, African melodies or Italian lullabies. Or they just come to sing old-fashioned love songs. They come for that moment when an individual voice soars heavenwards, swirling with a hundred other voices into rich layers of harmony.

For some it is a night out. For others a second chance to breathe life into forgotten dreams. For many of them it is life-changing, says Martin Meader, one of a growing band of people in WA who runs acapella choirs (singing without musical accompaniment) and singing workshops for the public.

Meader, a musician and film-maker who abandoned his guitar and saxophone for the human voice several years ago, now conducts singing workshops in England and the US as well as running three choirs in WA, including a professional 28-member ensemble called The Real Sing.

A youthful 45-year-old with close-cropped white hair, Meader is happiest in front of any one of his choirs, coaxing from a motley group of people a sound that stills the spirit. During the past few years, he has drawn up to 150 people each week to his Sing from the Heart community choir based in Perth, and another 60 to its sister choir in Rockingham.

It's all part of a huge resurgence of interest in singing that Meader maintains has been building in WA for the past five years.

"On Tuesday night when 150 people come along, the energy is just enormous. When you sing there's definitely a chemical reaction. People actually come up to me and tell me singing has changed their life."

Meader hasn't doubted the power of the human voice for a single moment since the day he first discovered the remarkable musical arrangements for the female voice

made by two women interned in a Japanese POW camp in Sumatra during World War II. Their music touched Meader so profoundly he felt compelled to bring not only their story but their unique music to the screen.

By the time the film *Paradise Road* --- which Meader co-wrote and co-produced --- finally hit cinema screens in 1997, it had consumed a decade of his life.

In unravelling the story of Norah Chambers --- who had trained and conducted the vocal ensemble in the women's camp at Palembang --- and Margaret Dryberg, who had helped her adapt classical works for four-



Martin Meader building trust and bringing out rich vocal harmonies with one of his three West Australian choirs.

part female voices, Meader met with the remaining survivors of the camp --- many of them Australian nurses --- and felt the course of his own life change.

It was the music that drew him initially, he explains. "The way these pieces are arranged is very, very uplifting, and very moving. I've seen grown men cry on hearing it. They took classical pieces of music by masters such as Ravel, Debussy, Beethoven and Mozart, miniaturised them and used the human voice to be the instruments."

As he got to know the survivors, Meader also became deeply affected by the women themselves, and was particularly aware of the enormous bond between them.

"For a lot of them the choir was a way of survival. They were forbidden to sing, and when they actually did their first concert in secret the Japanese guards came in with bayonets fixed, and the music stopped them in their tracks. Now that, to me, is very, very powerful. Their singing created love, trust, whatever you want to call it, but it's invisible. You can't go out and buy it in the shops."

There is no question that he now feels compelled to run choirs. When he first began it was really hard work, he recalls. "Now my life is split. I try to make films and I try to do the music. I've got three feature films ready to roll, and I've got three choirs. I think they are two very big jobs to do, and I'm not sure which pathway I'm being pushed down."

Indeed, so popular have the choirs become --- they are now some of the biggest in the country --- he has been forced to take on assistant Fiona de Rooij to help handle the volume of people.

Building trust within a choir is of paramount importance, Meader says. It gives people the confidence to sing. He continually refers to "the sleeping voice --- people who have the most amazing voices, but they think they can't sing, or they're told not to give up their day job, or just sing in the shower and all that kind of rubbish."

He uses the full range of vocal exercises and songs across a broad range of musical traditions "to get people to a place where they don't feel embarrassed or inhibited. A real beauty comes out of people when they sing for the love of it."

Meader believes that anyone can sing. "If you can speak, you can sing. It's as simple as that. It's just that people have forgotten how to do it. Things like television, computers, radio have taken over in their lives. People are more passive now. They don't do. They observe.

Singing started as a night out for Tony Sharland, 67. Now, after two years, it's a way of keeping the pain of his arthritis at bay. "I really love it. If you've got worries, they just fly out the window," he says.

Sue Fiocco was 50 before she joined a choir. Six months later, when her fledgling voice fluttered up to the rafter, she amazed herself. "I would never have dreamed six months ago that I would have got up publicly and sung a solo," she says. "I started just wanting time out from family and work. Now, at the age of 50, I'm starting a new career! Singing gives you courage. And that's all you need in life."

Mal Christison was brought up to believe only special people can sing. "That's a terrible thing to say to a young person," he says. "Singing has changed my life. It just makes me feel terrific. If I'm down and I go to sing I just feel great afterwards."

Like many professional musicians, Meader is taken aback by the surge of people rushing to join choirs across Australia. In WA, he observes, community choirs already exceed 20 and numbers have been building steadily for about five years --- and continue to grow. "I think it's partly a reaction to what's happening in our society at the moment. People are isolated. People feel they no longer have a voice in society.

"And," he adds, "people come together and sing as a way of having a voice."