Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

By Chris Fry

It All Kicks Off - April 2017

"Let's join the Gospel Choir" exclaims Sally, with the enthusiasm of a kid on her first day at work. "Choir?...Choir?" I splutter. "What do you mean, choir? Ridiculous. I can't sing in a choir!". I recite a long list of solid reasons why it wouldn't work, all of which Sally bats away with admirable aplomb, like David Gower cover-driving a journeyman county bowler to the rope. "Anyway, it is something we could do together". "But we do lots together" I moan. "Hanging out the washing and playing scrabble doesn't count" she hits back. "I mean a Church thing together". I am struggling. "We do coffee don't we?"

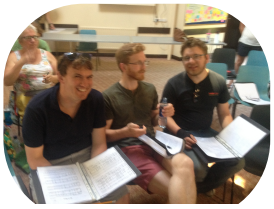
"Bootiful"

"Last day we can join. We have to tell Lisa today. Are you in?" A game, set, match smile crosses her face. I agree, reluctantly. I feel like a turkey who has just been winked at by Bernard Matthews. "

Great" she says, "you will love it". "No I won't" I mutter, petulantly.

First Rehearsal – April 2017

We rock up for our "night one". I feel comforted by many familiar faces and encouraged by the sight of new ones. Perhaps they will swell the congregation going forward? The performance was a massive success last year and as a consequence, more have joined , enthused by Lisa and her team and what they witnessed in 2016. We sign in. Well I am ok so far. I pass the register test and inwardly high-five myself. "Anyone need music or words?" yells Kirsty. Sally takes music because she "has done this type of thing before" and can read those funny squiggles, dots and lines, all crowded together like a bunch of mad black ants on a gridiron pitch. I take the words and grimace. "Eight songs! Ridiculous" I think. "Why are these bits in brackets? I can't do this".


"Matt mate - grow a beard by 16/7 or you are out my son"

"Warm-up" shouts Lisa, smashing the piano. We are then put through an obstacle course of face-contortions, shrieks, self-flagellation and scales. "What the heck?" I mutter at Sally.

"This is what you always do to get ready" she replies. "You don't just start singing! You need to warm up first"

Anyway, despite my face feeling like it has said hello to Mike Tyson's fist and feeling very self-conscious due to the fact I am actually "singing in public", I am starting to get into this. Lisa is an unstoppable force of energy and enthusiasm. She will need to be with people like me. We form up into our groups. Not surprisingly, I am "men". We are simply referred to as "men". Only 6 of us. The woman are altos 1, altos 2, sopranos 1 or sopranos 2.

I meet the other "men". Have I wandered onto a film-set? Will Ron Howard suddenly dash into the room and announce he is shooting a dystopic film about a matriarchal society,

Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

where the “men” give birth and hunt bison, while the women ruminate on Virginia Wolff, Proust and Plato? I return to planet earth. I know Matt but the others are new to me. Usual muttered “nice to meet yous” and handshakes and we are off.

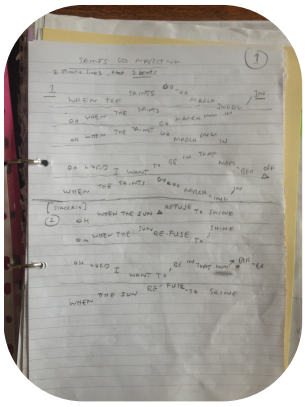
Sally and I have missed the first rehearsal so it is even harder. We tackle “He is Here” and “Why We Sing”. Lisa takes each one section at a time, then some sections join together, then we all sing a section together. I am utterly blown away by Lisa’s organisation, skill and astonishing talent. Despite my confusion, I am enjoying it, despite the odd bum note and singing when I shouldn’t. The other chaps have done this before and it is clear from the start we are a team. These are the Everest summiteers and they will drag this Snowdon novice to the summit, whether he wants it or not. We wrap up at 9:30pm, clear up and head home. “Did you enjoy it?” Asks Sally. “I found it intriguing” I responded, inscrutably. “Are we going next week?” she enquires. “Definitely”.

Further Rehearsals – April/May

Every Wednesday, we meet up. Polish up old songs and kick off new ones. A few have dropped out, but most of us remain. It is really starting to come together. We “men” are holding our own, despite being outnumbered nine to one. When we are not singing our bits, I love listening to the sopranos and altos sing together. The harmonies are beautiful (and I don’t use that word lightly).

By week 4, I am starting to get the hang of it, though Lion King (despite its simplicity) completely foxed me until (1) I listened to the recordings over and over (cheers Jack) and (2) Lisa sang the tune over our backing lines. Suddenly it clicked. Listening to the recordings is entertaining (as well as an essential follow up to a practice): Sally asking a question; Matt making a strange noise as if his trousers were too tight; amusing coughing and spluttering; Lisa making jokes and people laughing in response. It’s great reality TV, without the fake drama and pointless histrionics.

By now, I have developed a technique. I use solid lines to represent the note “ups and downs” during the practice, listen to the music files that Jack has uploaded to the web and then re-write the songs, with the actual words replacing my solid lines, accompanied by comments such as “come off on one”, “pause”, “count 3” or “top line”. I write phonetically, so “Regina” becomes “Rejeena”. I should know these things, but my Latin is as rusty as a 1970s Triumph Stag. Despite being a rank amateur, I feel I am getting there. We have now covered off 5 songs, which is astonishing. I love the fact that Lisa finds time to talk about the mechanics of singing, techniques etc. Her drawing is on a par with Tracey Emin, but it wouldn’t be fair if she were a brilliant artist on top of everything else! Not once has she shown impatience, let alone lost her cool.



This is the future of music

Singing in Church – 4th June

This is the first test. Can we cut it? Around two thirds of us are there, in front of the congregation. Chris, our vicar, is wearing his “this is going to be great” face. We sing our songs. From where I am standing, it sounds really good. The congregation seems to love it and we get many positive comments afterwards at coffee. We all feel hugely encouraged. I

Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

feel like going up to Lisa and asking if she wouldn't mind exchanging her talent for my collection of 1970 Esso World Cup coins, but it is highly likely, I feel (just in time) that she would regard my attempt at humour as "weird" and expel me from the choir. Consequently, I refrain.

Further Rehearsals – June

"Kirsty, Kirsty - I do the conducting - ok?"

We continue on our merry way, getting better and better. Ticket sales for the big day (16th July) are going really well. My children and Mother-in-Law are coming, from London and Suffolk respectively. I am scared of messing up in front of my kids and Sally's Mum sings in a choral society!

Lisa adds in a Sunday afternoon practice (25th) where we cover "Saints Go Marching In" and "Sister Act Medley".

Really helpful. She is organising the band and the soloists. She has her amazing core team behind her. I realise there is something special going on here. Last rehearsal in June (where has the time gone?).

Tackled "Happy Days" and "They Live in You".

I missed first rehearsal so they are both new and man do I know it. Thought my head was going to explode and concerned about making mistakes as only 4 blokes tonight. In the end, I felt I had done ok and we always have the recordings to listen to later.

Just before the end, Lisa made a passionate testimony of her faith and in particular, its relevance to "Happy Days". You could have heard a pin drop. Great stuff. Dress requirements are revealed. Purple or cream top, dark navy bottoms. I resolve to find a purple 1970s shirt with a huge collar, sequins and ruffs. Oh yes.

First July Rehearsal - 11 days to go

July 5th rehearsal will go down as one of the special "top ten moments" of this adventure. Lisa's friends and our soloists, Shean and Alex, have rocked up to work with us on "Searching" (Shean, lead vocalist and songwriter) and "Circle of Life" (Alex -lead vocalist).

This pair have CVs that knock you for six (Alex – Lion King, West End; Shean – supported Robbie Williams and Craig David, among others). You would happily pay large amounts of money so see these people and here they are, performing with us. I am amazed that despite being supremely talented, they are modest and supportive of what the equally talented Lisa is trying to achieve here.

Shean clearly has a powerful faith that he is happy to share. He takes us through his song and then it is time for Circle of Life, with Alex performing the solo. It's nice for Lisa to be able to step back and assess what is going on in the choir, rather than having to deal with vocals and piano. I feel tempted to ask Shean, Alex and Lisa to release a single. Maybe a cover of Zep's "Stairway to Heaven". Maybe not.

"Excuse me while I touch the sky....."

We also fit in an end to end of "Glory Glory"; "Saints Go Marchin'" and "Oh Happy Day". I

Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

am still struggling a little with “Glory Glory”, but we have a monster three hour rehearsal on Saturday, so I am sure I will be ok.

As for the shirts, well I have kicked the ruffs and sequins idea into the long grass – far too self-indulgent, plus my absurd attire would attract the wrong kind of attention on Performance Day.

Sally picked up a bottle of purple dye from Wilko and hey presto, two tired old shirts transformedinto purple heaven. Same wash, different shades. How did that happen?

Luckily, our colour co-ordinator, Alex, asked that we choose a selection of purple and off-white shades rather than a uniform colour.

Because of the colour theme, I am going to ask Lisa if we can add a new number – “Purple Haze”. Joe Grogan Lead Guitar, Jack Tombs vocals, Chris Fry comb and paper. If not “Purple Haze”, maybe “Knights in White Satin”? Oh Yes!!!!

One other great bit of news. “Ponytail” Dave (as opposed to “Beard” Dave) has been missing for a while. He has sadly been suffering from ill-health. Tonight he is back and looking good. Delighted to see him again.

Big Rehearsal – Saturday 8th July – 6 days to go

Three hours to get through all the songs and iron out any obvious mistakes and misunderstandings. The break will be at 3pm, when a wedding will take place next door. We crack on through six out of the eight.

“Vic” arrives, barely off the plane from Gran Canaria, clutching his bongos. He accompanies us on “Circle of Life” and “They Live in You”. He has great rhythm.

We have a few entertaining moments. For example, on Sister Act, when we blokes sing the alto lines instead of remaining silent. “Hey girls, the men are in the building” shouts Lisa, to obvious female amusement.

I'll get me coat

Red faces and bashful looks from the blokes.
For you who are Fast Show fans, the appropriate response would have been “I’ll get me coat”.

Many of us retire to the vicarage garden for our break.

More tea anyone?

Wedding is complete and we knock off the last two songs. Lisa finishes us by urging us to “keep on singing”. The concert is not the end of this adventure.

Sally throws the whole group into confusion by saying we are meant to be singing at the Summer Festival on September 2nd. Judging from her face, clearly this is news to Lisa. We check the publicity when we get home. Wording is “supported by gospel choir” not “gospel choir will be performing for your delectation”. I don’t think Sally will ever cut it as an interpreter, based on that. Imagine her in Brussels, at a meeting of the Commission – “Err, the Commission has agreed that over the next ten years, Member States will need to commit around eight million bananas a year to the CAP budget”. Hmmmmmmmm. Lisa will need to be told that she doesn’t need to plan another show!!

Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

Final/Dress Rehearsal – Wednesday 12th July – 4 days to go

Oh man, those words “Final Rehearsal” make me nervous. This is it. Business-end now. No more rehearsals to iron out those last few issues. This is the last chance. We are in Church and Lisa is trying her utmost to put us all in appropriate places. This is not an easy task, paramount to herding cream and purple cats and it takes two or three attempts. Shean and Alex are here and for the first time, we see and hear the band. We move into position singing “Glory Glory”. Lisa wants a body sway, but slightly mis-quoting here the amusing anecdote about ex-President Gerald Ford, “I can’t sing and sway at the same time”, so I sort of……wobble.

We get into position finally, but the choreography still needs a bit of fine-tuning. This will happen just before we kick off “The Big One” on Sunday.

Women!!

We work through all of the songs, including Shean’s “Searching”. I think a few people in the audience will be in tears on Sunday. Some because of the sheer beauty of this number and others like “He is Here” and some because my wailing will batter their eardrums into submission.

The are no major mistakes [blokes manage to shut up when they should do], but there are still a few things that Lisa has to sort out, so we don’t go right through on any of the songs without interruption. However, let’s get some perspective here. We are sounding really good and the choir, band and soloists seem to be blending nicely. Lisa has to ask for a bit more passion on some of the numbers. I put this down to nerves more than anything else. “You need an audience” she yells. Words of wisdom! We have been practicing for 4 months and we are ready to go.

9:30pm arrives in no time. I go to the pub to join a quiz team I turn out for. I just have time to assist them in part 2. However, the only question I can answer is about darts. “Mis-spent youth” says my friend.

I go home to bed and sleep badly. Keep waking up, imagining how it will be in front of all of those people. When I finally sink into a deep sleep, I dream the classic dream: I am up there on stage, as naked as the day I was born. Wake up in a cold sweat. Seeing me “au naturel” is something nobody should be subjected to.

More women!

Lisa has asked me to go with her to a Radio Cambridge dial-in early Sunday morning. Why did I join the choir? Good question!! I hope I don’t mess up.

Sunday 16th July - D-Day - BBC Radio Cambridgeshire

Today, Lisa and I are going to be radio stars. Ebay already flogging signed rugby shirts of mine for £10,000 upwards. Wow. Graham Norton's people hammering on my door, mobile white-hot. Not sure I can cope with this fame lark. Need an agent, a publiist and a team of bodyguards.

Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

Lisa meets me at Nero at 7am (yes, 7am!). Drive to Radio Station and are ushered into the waiting area by a chap with shoulder length hair who has an amazing laugh. Perfect for putting us at ease. We are being interviewed by Dawn Mungroo on the Sunday morning Faith Show. In we go, headphones on. Big colourful mikes sit obtrusively in front of our faces. "Hey Jude" fades out and we are on. Dawn asks Lisa about the background to the choir and what we are doing today. She answers beautifully - composed, precise and clear. My stomach is churning. Then it is my turn. "How did you get involved, what are you doing in the choir?" I had prepared all these witticisms about last singing when Queen Victoria was on the throne and how I was chucked out of my school choir for sounding like a vacuum cleaner, but decide to play safe.

Instead, I talk about being dragged kicking and screaming to the first rehearsal, but am now enjoying it and will miss it hugely. Also, mention this diary. Finally, I make sure I mention the great work Lisa has done. Interview is over in a flash. I think we did ok. By 8:15 am, we are back in Ely.

Getting into the zone. First concert is fast approaching. I need to don the purple shirt and head off to the Service.

Sunday 16th - 2:30pm - First Performance

Well this is it. The moment has arrived. We spend time re-jigging the positioning. "Men" are at the back. Makes sense, as nobody wants to look at the St Mary's equivalent of the Addams' Family. We rehearse until the doors open at two pm. We sound good. Back into back room for last few words from Lisa and a prayer from Matt and then it's time. We drift in and take our positions. The Church is packed. We men have decided to add something to Sister Act Medley but haven't told Lisa.

Sally's Mum has been to lunch with my kids and she is now in her place, as is our friend Will and his sisters. He is intrigued as to why we are doing this. "Fry singing? Come again???"

Lisa beckons us forward. We move into position singing "Glory Glory". I remember that at a recent rehearsal. the "OOOOOOs and AAAAAHHHS" were a bit iffy, but we get it bang on. First song over. Audience seemed to love it. We complete the two songs from the Lion KIng, then there is a Potter's Village video. Next up is "He Is Here". My favourite. Sounds wonderful. LIsa's face confirms that. Into "Happy Day", then it's solos from Alex and Shean.

The it's "Saints Go Marching". Trombone Tracy (aka Kirsty Smith) leads us in. Brilliant. Great song. Then my second favourite - Shean's "Searching".

We sit down again and it's a beautiful number from Lisa. Intensely moving because not only is she note-perfect, there is no mistaking the feelings behind it. I feel quite emotional. Back for last two numbers. The highly appropriate "Why We Sing" and then we close with "Sister Act Medley". This is the blokes' moment. We have our moment in the sun with the "I still remember" solo but we have our late addition too. Ha ha!! As we all sing the line "All-Le-Lu-ia", we duck down to the general confusion of the audience and Lisa. The it's our line. We leap up and sing "mater ameter inter-merata". Gets a good response. Lisa has that "hmmmm" look on her face but cracks a wry smile. Audience doesn't get the

Ely Pop Up Gospel Choir - 2017

fact they have to sing a couple of lines, so to everyone's amusement, she tells the audience off and does the last bit again. Brilliant. It has gone in a flash. We are back in the Hall for tea, coffee and cakes. Hundreds of people file in. Got a real buzz. Can't believe we have done it and done it so well. 1 down, 1 to go. Head back home for a brief rest before next Show.

Fabulous "women"

Sunday 16th - 6pm - Second Performance

Before you know it, we are out there again. Full House. Can see my children. After first number, it is clear from the whoops and whistles that the evening audience is a little more lively.

boys and girls in full flow

The audience is definitely lifting us. I feel we are all really enjoying this! Lisa conducts brilliantly, solos are great, band is great and the audience is loving it. Again, Lisa's face tells us we are "doing good". The lads do their "leap of faith" again and nobody breaks anything. Beard Dave is grimacing and clutching his back. Hope he is ok.

Suddenly it's the last number. Feeling a little cheated. Want to stay out there longer. Finish, to fantastic applause and we are off. Back in Hall for nibbles and prosecco. My kids loved it, which is a pretty amazing accolade.

Stay for a while and chat excitedly. Then it's off to the Cutter. Not in the mood to let this day end on anything other than other than Bubbles. We will be having a Choir knees-up next Wednesday and then a new adventure will begin.

CAN'T WAIT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

THE MAGNIFICENT SIXTY