

## **The people's choir: Ubuntu groups give everyone who loves to sing a voice**

Written by [Colby Dunn](#)



“I can’t sing.”

“Nobody wants to hear my voice.”

“I couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket.”

They’re recognizable refrains, the shield of the perceived non-musical whenever the Christmas carolers come around or it’s time for someone to jump-start a chorus of “Happy Birthday.”

With phenomena like “American Idol” and “The Voice,” perhaps we’ve all learned that the singing is best left to the real professionals, because even those who think they can sing apparently can’t.

The Ubuntu Choirs Network would like to disabuse us of that notion.

“The idea of there being legions of people who can’t sing, who are tone deaf, is absolute nonsense,” said Shivon Robinsong, who started the network and its founding choir, The Gettin’

Higher Choir, in Victoria, Canada, in 1996. That choir is still going strong, now around 300 members strong, and other choirs have sprung up around the globe that follow the same principles, central to which is what could be described as the come-as-you-are concept. These choirs are for anyone inclined to sing, whether lifelong musician or confirmed music avoider.

“I was noticing how many people go around apologizing for their voices and making excuses and saying things like, ‘I can’t sing. I’m tone deaf. You wouldn’t want to hear me sing,’” said Robinsong. “All these disclaimers people have about their singing voice as if it’s flawed, and I thought there needed to be just a safe place people could come and sing just for the fun of it and the joy of it, without having to worry about perfection, without having to worry about am I good enough or not.”

And so her choir, and what became the network and the movement, were born.

In North Carolina, there’s just one such choir, and it makes its home in Franklin. It’s led by Tom Tyre, who took on the post after a group of friends decided they wanted to sing. Though after accepting the appointment of choir director, he then realized he didn’t really know how to be a choir director.

“I love singing like everybody in the group, and I just said instantly yes to that, and later realized, oh I don’t know how to do this,” said Tyre.

So he went to a workshop in West Virginia for a weekend, and after some online searching, came across the Ubuntu network. Annually, Robinsong and her co-director put on what they call Community Choir Leadership Training in Victoria, teaching others to lead inclusive, acapella choirs.

Tyre, recently retired, decided that’s just what his group needed. So instead of heading on a tropical, post-retirement vacation, he headed to Canada.

“As a gift to myself, I used the money that I had saved up to go to Hawaii for that,” said Tyre.

He returned with no regrets about missing Hawaii, but a lot of new information and new friends who direct choirs all around the world.

They started with around a dozen choristers but have now reached about 50 or 60 members, depending on the day, which Tyre says is about their capacity, given their small rehearsal spaces. But even with 50 members, it’s an experience that’s particularly intimate, because if you don’t consider yourself a natural singer, singing is an extremely vulnerable experience.

“When somebody is new to the group, it takes them probably a month to really overcome that feeling of being exposed. Once it gets safe, then people just take off,” said Tyre. “It is incredible; it’s really liberating. So when you have a group of people who have done this together, they have this intimacy; they’ve been vulnerable with each other. I’ve never had better friends than the people I sing with.”

Nate Anderson seconded that last part particularly. He and his wife, Gail, both grew up singing in church, in school musicals, in musical families, so they're not new to the choir setting. But the difference with Ubuntu, explains Nate: "You know, the biggest difference is we have way more fun doing it than I ever did before. Some people bowl; some people play golf; we sing."

They're really not designed to be a performance choir, they just sing for the fun of it. But every now and then, they turn their talents to fundraising concerts, and during the next few months, they'll be starting monthly sing-alongs. The sing-alongs won't have a space for audiences, but the choir welcome singers in particularly acoustic environments, wherever they may be.

The group sings world music, and Tyre collects musical contributions from other directors around the world, from Malaysia to England to Africa. They even have one particular favorite that's sung in a now-extinct African tongue.

"We sing anything from old gospel tunes to the Sufi music; we do old Latin chants; we do one that was written in the 1400s," said Tyre. Pretty much anything that's uplifting, interesting, or just plain fun to sing.

For Robinsong, the movement's founder, the success of her choir, choirs like the Franklin chapter, and the growth of the worldwide network isn't surprising.

"It's only in very recent years that we've had this kind-of epidemic of people not thinking they're good enough," said Robinsong. Being a consumerist culture has trained us that "if you love music, go out and buy it."

So each year they continue to run their workshop, helping more people realize that singing isn't a privilege bestowed by Simon Cowell, it's an ancient practice that's ingrained in the fabric of all of humanity.

Ubuntu itself is an old word, borrowed from South Africa's Nguni Bantu language, and popularized and expounded upon by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. It's really a concept, a little nebulous in definition, but in its essence, said Robinsong, it's the idea "I am, because we are." It's the concept of community, and that's why they chose it as their name.

"My passion has always been how do you build community?" she said. "And singing is the way."