

For the Joy of Singing

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In 1994, Calgary singer Barry Luft decided to have a male chorus sing with him on a recording of “What’s the Life of a Man?”. The group was made up of men who had been significant in Barry’s life. Eighty-eight agreed to participate. Barry sent each a cassette copy of the song, and eventually everyone assembled to give it a go. With the technical help of recording engineer Richard Harrow, they made the recording.¹ Barry recalls how impressive the sound was, bouncing off the walls of the Altadore Baptist Church. As the project wound down, a number of the men indicated how much fun it had been, both the recording and getting together to sing. “Why not,” some said, “do this just for the fun of it?”. “Men Folk Singing” was born.

Since then the group, augmented by interested others and diminished by folks moving on, has met on a more or less monthly basis from September to June. A session I attended in October 2013 was made up of 29 men, all in rousing voice.

Three rules guide “Men Folk Singing”:

- No word sheets, smart phones, or music stands. The intent here is to get everyone to focus on the joy of singing, not to worry about “getting it right”. Word sheets draw singers’ eyes and attention away from their

colleagues and diminish the interchange between participants while singing, so are verboten. Should the memory of the man leading a song falter, there is usually someone to help out. Failing that, everyone laughs and the group moves on – no big deal. Indeed, many times a singer has brought a song back to a subsequent session with any falterings repaired.

- The singing is unaccompanied – no guitars, banjos or instruments of any kind. Again, the intent here is to bring singing into sharp focus.
- No wimpy singing. From the outset, the goal was loud and bold singing.

There’s also a fourth implied rule, namely, a song chosen should be singable in this context. This typically involves either a well-known “standard” (e.g., “Jambalaya” was sung early in the session I attended) or a song with a good chorus (e.g., “Jamaica Farewell”).

The two-hour sessions, typically taking place late Saturday mornings, are arranged with everyone seated in a circle.² This circle is pretty organic, as late arrivers are able to find chairs and insert them into places made by folks shifting to make room.



Figure 1: Men Folk Singing in the circle.



Figure 2: Men Folk Singing in the circle.

Tradition has it that the session begins with “Viva l’Amour”. In an instant, the room, previously abuzz with animated chatter, comes alive with voices raised in song. The end of this and every song is marked by enthusiastic applause. Then someone will lead a song, typically by just beginning to sing – no introduction, no apology, no pitch pipe – just plain singing. Sometimes there will be a brief discussion of a song in the interval (e.g., “I think the Limelighters did that one”), sometimes a joke (e.g., the one about the terrorists who took over a lawyers’ office and threatened to release one each hour their demands weren’t met), and sometimes a new verse, often a parody, might be added. And so it goes until the break, which usually occurs after an hour of gleeful singing. Coffee, water, and cheese buns are available, as is an opportunity to meet, greet and catch up with fellow singers.



Figure 3: The men enjoy refreshments and fellowship on a break.

The end of the break is announced in song, as “Lloyd George knows my father ...” begins to filter in

among the chatting groups. Everyone scurries to their seats and announcements are made, about both upcoming group events and other happenings in town. Then the singing begins anew. The end of the session is announced by the singing of “Let the Union Be”. The group disbands, many helping to store chairs and clear up, etc.³ Before long, Banff Trail Hall is quiet, with no sign of the joy and vitality that had just erupted within its walls. As I drive home, my heart is full of joy as songs we’d sung swirl through my memory. This feeling lasts well into the evening. It was a true privilege to join these men in their unique and fulfilling enterprise.



Figure 4: The men enjoy refreshments and fellowship on a break.

In the session I attended, a good mix of material was sung: several shanties (e.g., “John Kanaka”, “Rolling Down to Old Maui”, “Bully in the Alley”), some revival treasures (e.g., “Harry Pollit”, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone”, “Tom Dooley”, “Before

They Close the Minstrel Show”, “The Outside Track”), some Canadian songs (e.g., “Forty Below”, “Working Man”, “I’se the B’y”, “Alouette”) and, perhaps due to the presence of a certain interloper, a number of railway songs (e.g., “Hudson Bay Line”, “Kettle Valley Line”, “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad”, “City of New Orleans”). At this session, the originating song, “What’s the Life of a Man?”, was reprised as well. The diversity of material that men bring to the sessions is important:

I love most of the songs, for a great variety of reasons. Some are funny, some are serious, some describe some interesting moments in history, and some are inspiring. (Gary Sykes, October 2013)

I also enjoy learning songs from different times, periods and cultures; little Irish ditties, North England laments and, of course, sailing shanties from the world over! (John Robertson, October 2013)

“Men Folk Singing” performs publicly once a year. This is at the Water Valley Celtic Festival, held in a small town northwest of Calgary. The group assembles at the old schoolhouse and holds a typical session to a packed house. Norm Walker is a well-known performer from Saskatoon who performs at this festival most years. He indicates:

Water Valley Celtic Festival is a treasure and Men Folk Singing is one of the jewels. So I only make one main request: not to book me at the same time as the “Men”. It’s a daylong trip to get there from where I live, and these people often are the biggest part that makes it worthwhile. (Walker, October 2013)

Another annual event is “Men Folk Singing in the Evening”. This is a singing party made up of the singers plus spouses and friends. Tables are set in a circle and the format of the regular sessions is repeated.⁴ This affords the partners of the Men an opportunity to understand why they disappear on sometimes job-filled Saturday mornings.

From the beginning of the session I attended, it was clear that singing together brought great joy to the participants. Indeed, the happiness and enthusiasm was palpable from the get-go. I communicated with a number of the members in an effort to get a handle on the depth of the feelings involved. The most common sentiments related to the good feeling that emerges during the sessions can be seen in the quotes below:

Singing with Men Folk Singing, I have to say, is an absolute “elixir for the soul”. To sing in this group, truly uplifting! (Jack Bomford, October 2013)

Singing, especially songs you love, has an effect that is a mood enhancer like no other. ... The best part is the singing and the happiness I feel. (Colin Grant, October 2013)

It is certainly a freeing experience to participate in Men Folk Singing. (Ron French, October 2013)

I discovered Men Folk Singing about 10 years ago. Singing with Barry and the others felt like coming home to a place I’d never been before. I know – I stole that line from John Denver, but that’s exactly how it felt. (Joel Weder, October 2013)

I am always amazed at how a person can have just gone through a bad week and have the slate cleared by Men Folk Singing, even if it is just for a couple of hours. I had not realized the impact of Men Folk Singing until I had gone through a difficult week and woke up on Saturday wishing it was a Men Folk Singing Saturday. Now if we could just bottle Men Folk Singing and carry it with us in much the same manner as we carry our bottled water – how marvelous that would be. (Dave Settles, October 2013)

These good feelings last long into the day and sometimes beyond:

When I get home, the remainder of my Saturday is always on a high and can carry on for days as I hum old songs. (Colin Grant, October 2013)

I always leave with a song or two in my head, and it’s easy to tell that I’ve been to Men Folk Singing when I get home. (Gary Sykes, November 2013)

The Men Folk Singing sessions are even considered therapeutic!

Men Folk Singing sessions just leave me happier and more alive. I wonder if it is the act of singing that actually has a positive physiological effect on the body. The vibration of 30-40 men singing is an experience in itself. Of course, it’s a fun gathering too; everyone’s in a good mood, and looking to have a good time. (Gary Sykes, October 2013)

The Men Folk Singing monthly get together is so great; it's like the cheapest therapy a guy can find. Our culture no longer has the singing avenues we had in the last century so this group sing-a-long alleviates depression and sadness and gives your brain and vocal chords a great and thorough workout. (Colin Grant, October 2013)

There is nothing quite like the experience of being engulfed by the spirit that fills the Banff Trail Community Hall when this multigenerational and motley crew of singers gathers to together to "drive away all melancholy". (David Ward, October, 2013)

Another comment I received quite frequently involved how it did not matter if you knew the words to songs – the goodwill of the gathering carries the day, increasing enjoyment and willingness to try something new.

It is great to be able to join in on a song that you don't know all the words of and know that someone will pick up on it, or get a laugh if you get it wrong. (Ron French, October 2013)

It doesn't matter if you don't know any of the lyrics – you just figure out as much as you can as the songs progress. (Gary Sykes, October 2013)

The cardinal rule – no song sheets – promotes a reliance on one's own memory and one's own voice. A sort of enforced folk process, true, but it is a great equalizer. We come as who we are and share what we have. (Steven Méthot, November 2013)

I know lots of folk songs, but at 70 the words don't often jump out. I find the security of being with friends allows me to try different songs I'd long forgotten. Thinking you might forget the words can be daunting, but there is always someone who remembers and we continue on ... if not, we repeat the last verse/chorus and call it complete! (John Robertson, October 2013)

This "freedom from the tyranny of words" has many effects, one of which is how some members' confidence has been given a boost by being involved.

No matter that I was nervous and unsure – they encouraged me to sing out, just for the joy of singing. It seemed as though I should have known these guys all my life. I'd been singing, or hum-

ming a tune under my breath, since I was little, and it was such a pleasure to find a group who share my passion. (Joel Weder, October 2013)

I have always enjoyed singing and with very limited talent I feel I can hide my voice in the assembled harmony. I believe that the joy of Men Folk Singing is expressed in a line from the favourite "The Whiffenpoof Song": "And the magic of their singing cast its spell". (Joe Lothian, November 2013)

Men Folk Singing has helped me find my voice and recapture the joy of singing in a group for the sake of the singing. (Steven Méthot, November 2013)

One particularly poignant account came from Deanna Downton-Jullyan. Her late husband, Bud Jullyan, was a long-standing member of the group:

Bud was a very shy person. When he was younger, someone told him to whistle, because he sure couldn't sing! So he was really afraid to sing after that.

He started going to the once a month sing-alongs. Most of the time, he would just listen. Gradually, as he became more comfortable, he would join in. I began to notice that he was starting to sing hymns with me at church and he was in tune!

There are some great people in the group. Wonderful, strong voices and really friendly. Bud loved to go for the fellowship, the cheese buns (!) and the jokes people told. He always appreciated Donnie Williams' jokes and would come home and tell them to me. (Deanna Downton-Jullyan, October 2013)

Deanna went on to tell how Men Folk Singing became an important part of Bud's last days:

When Bud was dying of cancer in the fall of 2012, the Men's group came out a couple of weeks before he died and sang for a whole hour in the chapel out at Foothills Hospice (near Okotoks). It lifted Bud and me right up. He kept saying, "This is so much fun!" He forgot his pain and his exhaustion. What a blessing they were to him – a great last gift.

The singing was good for Bud's brain and memory but especially for his soul. I am grateful for that part of his life and what a gift music can be. (Deanna Downton-Jullyan, October 2013)

The joy of singing has carried the day for this group. Getting together simply to sing, unimpeded by music stands, instruments, and commercial goals, has generated a marvelous activity that has spread well beyond the confines of Banff Trail Hall into the lives of those who take part. The pure delight of this activity is clear.

I appreciate the camaraderie, I appreciate the support, most of all I appreciate the shared love of story and song. (Steven Méthot, November 2013)

Men Folk Singing reaffirms my belief in the wondrousness of music – how it can change and transform individual lives and social life. You can almost touch the true spirit of community while sitting in this group’s living circle. Singing is the glue that holds them together, making it a true testament to music’s power. Indeed, Men Folk Singing can be seen as a modern-day incarnation of the same spirit that created generations of the musics we’ve come to know as “folk” – music that serves to bind a group together. Sure, in the “old days” such singing may have taken place in the fo’c’sle of a schooner, in a lumber camp, or around a campfire. But today that same spirit lives in Banff Trail Hall – the same passion, the same camaraderie, the same love of singing simply for the joy of it.

For me, what makes Men Folk Singing sessions so special is the unusual confluence of five distinct factors including their informal nature (singing in a circle, no leader, no agenda), their focus on the fundamentals of music-making (listening and singing), the wide range of voice quality and musical experience, the diversity of material brought forward by the participants (from traditional sea shanties to Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah”), and the simple yet profound nature of these gatherings – making music together and enjoying each other’s company. (David Ward, October 2013)

Notes

¹ The end product can be heard on Barry’s CD *Lean a Little*, available at www.BarryLuft.com. See *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*, June 1995, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 10, for an article about the song.

² There is a small fee to pay for rental of the Hall and refreshments.

³ Barry Luft and Frank Phillips, who makes the coffee and supplies the cheese buns, are the “main men” behind the session. Frank is also a font of unique songs. Both are care-

fully “laid back” to ensure that the group works as it should.

⁴ Clem Feldmeyer is the organizer of this session.

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