



FOUNDATIONS FOR CONFIDENCE

I woke up this morning with something odd running through my mind: 1,2,3,4; 2,2,3,4; 3,2,3,4; 4,2,3,4.

*Hey brother..... 2,2,3,4*

*Hey sister...*

I was counting myself in to the beginning of a song. I have NEVER woken up doing that before.

Later on, I went out for a run and started musing about what to write for this month's article. In amongst my thoughts I found myself repeating over and over, some lines of a song. When I recognised the words, I suddenly recalled my waking moments and knew I had something relevant to write about.

I sing. Yet I am resistant to calling myself 'A Singer'. Is this a question of confidence? I became curious about my resistance – wanting to understand what would need to be different for me to call myself a Singer? Knowing I have a lovely voice? Sometimes I believe I have. People telling me I have a beautiful voice? Some say I do. Being able to read music and turn it into sound? I can't but there are 'professional' singers who can't either. Being able to hold a harmony whilst others sing a different part? I can. Keeping in time? Ah! On my own, I tend to go off the beaten track! I get lost in a melody, lose a grip on the rhythm and then forget where I am. I throw myself off and get lost. This means I am not self-reliant in holding and carrying a song. And it is for this reason – I realise - that I find I cannot call myself a Singer.

My journey with singing has been long – starting out with my closet need to 'do it' but feeling simply too scared to sing out in the presence of others. Then in 1997 my need to sing tipped to slightly outweigh my terror. I joined a small beginners a cappella community choir after having 3 singing lessons. My discomfort in those 3 sessions was acute, painful – yet through them I discovered that I could hear the notes, and know when I was 'off key' even though I did not have sufficient experience and practice in my vocal technique to always keep me in tune. I wanted so much to be able to sing without feeling that familiar crushing shame that felled me and silenced me each time I hit a bum note. It's not even that I want to be a professional singer – I don't. For me it is a matter of emotional expression, feeling the vibration in my body – being soothed, feeling joy, helping me cry when I need to – accessing emotions that might otherwise remain hidden or locked out. Paradoxically I lose and find myself through the act of singing. Through singing I am able to experience myself and life in ways that are more vital, enriching, enlivening. It delivers me to myself – preferably without an audience.

Performing has never been the point for me though I am oddly drawn in a somewhat masochistic tendency to test myself in that space. Slowly and surely, as I overcame the terror of letting my voice out loud enough to be heard, I began to develop sufficient confidence, enabling me to do a few solos in various friendly, a cappella community contexts. I have also been known to wander the streets in strange cities to find empty churches in which to let my voice soar in sacred song. My passion and determination to develop my voice and confidence carried me through many years. UNTIL I went on a Jazz workshop about 5 years ago. I thought I was ready. Ha! I had never used a microphone. I had never sung accompanied by musicians. In our first session, we were told we would all sing. I was asked to go first. Out and out shock. I was asked for the key in which I sang my song. I embarrassingly didn't know. I was asked to set the pulse and count the musicians in. I didn't know how. Sheer panic set in. I launched into my song as if I was riding a horse that ran away with me as soon as my bum hit the saddle. The musicians did whatever they did but I was deaf to it. And at the end, when I turned round to thank them, before I could speak they blurted out to me 'you have to leave space for us'. I looked at them full of shame and confusion and said: 'I don't even know what that means!.' I got off that stage faster than the blink of an eye, burst into tears and wondered how I would ever show my face again. I did.

Every single day of that 6-day course, I was terrified. Every single day, I cried. Every single day, shame tormented me and I said I would not perform in the Concert on our last day. Yet I did. Somehow. I got through the whole shocking, terrifying experience.

Roll forward 5 years. I have been in my current choir, the *Aw Blacks*<sup>1</sup> for 2 years. We always work with musicians. I have rarely felt like I am in charge of myself nor that I have mastered the songs we sing. I was not enjoying myself; not

<sup>1</sup> Run by Kirsty Baird of *Sing in the City* <http://www.choiredinburgh.co.uk/>



## inspiring leaders

getting the benefits I would normally associate with singing. And so a month ago, I decided to switch singing teachers to work on the songs we do in this choir. A couple of weeks ago, Annette<sup>2</sup> pointed out that I was coming in a fraction of a beat late in various songs. The cloak of shame wrapped itself around me. I felt panicky and out of control, with a sense of helplessness, hopelessness. Again. I wanted to run and not return. But I did. The following session, we sat down with a song – and she got me to practice finding and counting myself in to the beat. I discovered that simply by focusing on it – giving it primary attention – I could actually work it out. Separating out the elements that make up a song (rhythm, tune, words, interpretation) and paying attention to the one at which I was least proficient, helped me to see that it was not beyond my reach. More importantly, I came to see that I did **in reality** have the capacity to do something that, for years, I believed I could not do. Not so helpless; not so hopeless. Confidence rising.

I spent so many years working on my tuning and vocal production, yet did little to develop my overall musicality. This has kept me dependent on others and has limited my self-confidence. My experience at the Jazz workshop had been so emotionally tough; and rather than choosing to extend my learning in the realms that had been revealed to me, I turned away – and kept myself stuck.

So, when I woke up on Friday morning, counting myself in with 1,2,3,4; 2,2,3,4..... you can imagine how surprising and exciting that actually was for me. I knew something had shifted. As I reflect whilst writing this article, I now recognise that I am confident about holding a tune. I am also confident about being able to learn and remember words. What I have not yet fully grown is the confidence in myself to work out and hold the rhythm in a song I'm singing and have others join me and be supported by me as a responsible, capable partner. That is a biggie. And yet I also recognise that even if I did have this ability, it would still not be enough to have me call myself a Singer. Why?

To me, being a Singer is not simply having technique, staying in tune and in time, and remembering words. It is also about authentically communicating meaning and emotion. It is where all the dimensions that make up a song come together and are delivered with a coherence that invites and supports others to be a part of the exchange – in the co-creation with other musicians and singers; and in the giving and receiving of the song. Being a Singer is not 'a job' or 'role' or a label to define someone who sings songs. To me, it is the coming together of the technical/ rational and the emotional/ irrational – the inexplicable synergy that shapes how someone shows up in the world; how we experience them and know them to be who they are. If you followed 'The Voice, 2014' you will have seen many technically amazing and confident vocalists; performers; musicians; dancers; entertainers; even aspiring politicians. To me there was one - Sally Barker - who stood out as A SINGER in all the ways I understand. She manifested the clarity and simplicity of someone being wholly herself, drawing on her gifts and sharing them with the world. Being, knowing and doing what, for her, could not and cannot be denied. Exquisite coherence.

With Singers like her in the world; I can confidently say: A Singer I am not. And I am curiously comfortable with that. ☺

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<sup>2</sup> Annette Hanley <http://singersongwriteredinburgh.com/annette.html> works alongside Kirsty Baird in the *Aw Blacks* and *Sing in the City*