



Different choirs singing together

In tune with all kinds of members

Rock Choir leader Vikki Hewitt gets a chorus of approval from SUE CADE

I sang from an early age; school choirs, singing competitions, musical theatre, but my vocal prowess diminished as other things took over, until my warbling was only undertaken in the car - much to the mortification of my offspring.

Then I joined Rock Choir and rediscovered my love of harmonies and hitting that top note.

Rock Choir is a national phenomenon and the East Devon group of choirs I sing with is led by the talented Vikki Hewitt. Vikki studied vocals at ACM Guildford and went on to sing with the ACM Gospel Choir, as a backing vocalist for Michael Ball

and Beverly Knight, and as part of a Queen tribute act.

She was approached by Rock Choir in 2012 after a family friend recommended her. After four years of leading choirs in

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West Sussex, Vikki returned to her hometown of Exmouth. "I was missing the more relaxed pace of life in Devon, it's much more chilled and there's such a sense of community." But although she was ready to leave

Surrey, she wasn't ready to leave Rock Choir. "I took on the existing Exeter choir and set up new choirs in Exmouth, Honiton and Sidmouth."

So, what does it take to lead a choir? "A leader has to have a certain personality; obviously you must be musical, play piano, have an ear for harmony, be able to conduct, and organise events - but you must also be able to smile. Lots."

Rock Choir meets weekly during term time and although members opt for a preferred choir, they can go to other groups too, for example when they need extra rehearsals on the run up to performances. Performing isn't

obligatory but many members like this performance element. “Often when they join, people will say they can’t sing in public, but ten weeks later it’s quite a different story.”

Generally, performances are for charity or the community and are provided free, such as at the Exmouth Festival and Donkey Sanctuary Summer Fair. There have also been flash mobs at Sandy Park during Chiefs games, and choirs from across the country have come together to sing at Proms in the Park – in 2018, 8,000 choir members sang along to *Dancing in the Streets*. And in November 2019, an unforgettable opportunity to record at the famous Abbey Road Studios.

So just what type of person does Rock Choir attract? “My choirs include teachers and nurses, BSL enablers, vets, solicitors, doctors and retired people. The youngest member is 14 although most are between 40 and 65. The oldest members are in their seventies.”

Vikki feels that members get the sense of belonging to a family through singing. “People join to sing at their session, but then they start socialising; getting together for dog walks on Exmouth beach,



Vikki Hewitt sings

meeting up for lunch, organising a Christmas meal. It’s all about connections and physically bringing people together.”

She says that anyone who is suffering from bereavement, illness or depression is able to leave everything at the door during rehearsals. “Even if you’ve had a rubbish day, you have to go and turn it on for those one-and-a-half hours.”

There’s no audition process and anyone can have a free taster session before deciding whether to join. Songs are learnt by repetition and Rock Choir provides downloads for practice at home. Vikki believes that anyone can sing. “Even my mum, who goes to the Exmouth choir. She’s not a natural singer but

KEEP BRITAIN SINGING

With coronavirus gripping the country Rock Choir aims to ‘Keep Britain Singing’ with live sessions from its Facebook page every day at 3pm. Individuals and families in isolation can join in and sing with the day’s choir leader who will be delivering an uplifting, positive song via Facebook Live.

Each song will be announced the day before and the activity will include the mass sing-a-long plus fun extras, singing tips and ideas to help everyone connect with music over this period of time. Song requests and interaction are welcome!

This wonderful initiative will help give everyone a little stability and routine until self-isolation guidelines are lifted.

she’s been there for three years and she’s now technically much better.”

Every choir, it seems, has a different personality and even though Vikki teaches exactly the same way, the results differ. “Honiton is one big community choir, while Exmouth is very funny.” Exmouth is also home to the ‘naughty boys’ – the back row male singers who often turn up in fancy dress to match the songs. *Don’t Stop me Now?* Moustaches and white vest tops. *Roar?* Lion masks. “They’re always causing trouble,” Vikki laughs. She’s keen to encourage more men to join, as choirs are always in need of additional basses.

In her spare time, Vikki sings with the Liberty Sisters, a trio performing swing and jazz from the 1930s to ‘50s. “I love the music and the chance to get dressed up, the close harmonies and the stories the songs tell.” She says she loves Rock Choir and the Liberty Sisters in equal measure. “There’s just so much fulfilment in being a singer, there’s so much fulfilment through music.” ♦

Rockchoir.com

BELOW:
At Exmouth
Festival



CHARITY FUNDRAISING OVER TWO TERMS

Honiton Choir: £155 for Devon Freewheelers £155

Exeter Choir: £55 for ELF and £60 for Homestart

Sidmouth Choir: £79 for Charlie’s Fund

Exmouth Choir (morning): £80 for Exmouth Sea Scouts

Exmouth Choir (evening): £100 for Pete’s Dragons