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Church hymns and social beers: how Australia is reviving the magic of singing together

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It was 2009. John Farnham walked on stage at the disaster relief concert for the most devastating bushfires in Australian history. He belted out You're The Voice to 36,000 people at the Sydney Cricket Ground. Then, as he lowered his microphone, 36,000 voices belted it right back.

Farnham knew the real star that day was not himself, but the thousands of everyday Australians singing in solidarity with their hurting nation.

Singing together is electrifying, but can Australians tap into this magic without the tragedy?

[HQ] Coldplay- You're The Voice (with John Farnham) Sound Reli...



We're all the voice.

The science behind the magic

Group singing has a proven ability to produce positive social bonding and help us tune in to others' feelings.

That sense of connecting and relating can boost our mental health; particularly crucial given many Australians seriously neglect self-care.

After taking part in a year-long community singing program, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reported reduced depression, increased resilience and a greater sense of social connection.

Physiologically, research shows group singing can increase the hormone oxytocin which helps us bond with people and feel good. It can decrease cortisol levels to positively modulate our immune system. Making music together may also release endorphins that help our tolerance of pain.

Rewinding on Australian singing

Australia's identity as a singing nation has never quite matched countries like Wales, "the land of song". Centuries-old singing traditions are well-suited to huddling indoors in snowy northern hemisphere villages.

Indeed, the tradition of singing Christmas carols was devised as a cure for the European winter blues. Our warmer Australian climate, in contrast, coaxes us outdoors for other activities in wide open spaces.



SINGING THE POET LAUREATE'S FAUSTIC HYMN AT THE EXHIBITION BUILDING.

Hymn singing at Melbourne's Royal Exhibition Building in 1882. State Library of Victoria

Australia's choral tradition grew initially through church music; printed on tiny 12x7cm pages, books from the early 1800s provide a glimpse at the hymns church choirs and congregations once sang.

Music researcher [Dianne Gome reports](#) these books were also used for official state occasions and in the home. They were so popular, Australians began to create their own versions.

Singing was part of 19th century Australian life. At home, pianos were treasured for family singalongs and a sign of [wealth and culture](#). Choirs blossomed, such as the The Brisbane Musical Union (now [The Queensland Choir](#)) which formed in 1872 with 112 members. Singing was valued, and [local journals](#) critiqued technique. Even [The Wireless Weekly](#) reported a radio poll "to decide the worst singer" in 1942.

Work songs – morale boosters as workers labour through repetitive tasks – also showed our early singing culture. [One Queensland man recently described](#) life as a 14-year-old in a 1930s tram track foundry:

Every night I came home exhausted. It was hard work, but we used to sing [...] How many people sing at their work today?

Alongside its presence in churches, work places and social gatherings, singing became a pillar of Australian education.

A book on [education history in Victoria](#) reports singing was introduced in the 1850s for “harmonising and refining the mind” and as a “most favourable influence [...] on the moral associations of the goldfields”.

While some traditions in schools continue today, [claims of a crowded curriculum](#) and [de-valuing of the arts](#) have pushed school singing from essential to optional.

There also exists a [social pressure](#) on Australian boys to play sport rather than sing in choirs.



Sydney Girls High School students perform a song for the radio, photographed in the 1930s. Sam Hood/State Library of New South Wales

Today's Aussie group singing style

A fair dinkum Aussie singing style is well established in sporting circles.

The 1978 World Cricket Series jingle [C'mon Aussie C'mon](#) was so simple and catchy its tune still rings through stadiums today. Likewise, Mike Brady's [Up There Cazaly](#) – inspired by the 1910s footballer whose name was used in World War II battle cries – has been a favourite crowd singalong at AFL Grand Finals for decades.

[Footy club theme songs](#) aside, Brisbane Lions fans will be particularly familiar with a modern opportunity for sports singing: goal songs. After every goal at a Lions' home game, a snippet from a player-chosen track blares across the stands.

Not all of these song selections make successful singalongs, but Charlie Cameron's choice of Take Me Home Country Roads is a clear favourite. Tellingly, [the crowd keeps singing](#) after the music stops.

At the other end of the spectrum of group size and vocal expertise is the small Australian-bred a capella group [The Idea of North](#). Their expert musical arrangements and blended sound perfectly encapsulates collaborative singing with unity, harmony and joy.



Astrid Jorgensen and Waveney Yasso with their Brisbane Pub Choir in 2021. Wikimedia Commons

For a quirky Australian choral option, a group of men from Mullumbimby formed the “fake” Russian choir, Dustyesky (a wordplay on the famous Russian writer Dostoevsky). They don’t speak the language, yet their energy and passion for singing made them a hit in Russia and brought about an invitation to sing in Moscow.

With millions of internet views, another highly successful Australian response to group singing came from Astrid Jorgensen, creator of Pub Choir. With laughter and a drink, members of the public meet at a licensed venue to learn a song in three-part harmony.

Jorgensen’s tailored musical arrangements of popular songs suit untrained singers, don’t require music reading skills and make singing in harmony with complete strangers easy and fun. Jorgensen found the key to motivating Aussies to sing together is crowds, humour and a social beer.