

# BLACK VOICES CELEBRATE

**25 years of performing their unique brand of a cappella including traditional African, Caribbean and English folk songs, jazz, Gospel, pop and reggae, in a truly harmonic blend that celebrates their rich African, Caribbean and British heritage yet transcends gender, race, age or religious persuasion.**



**Dorrette Hanson spends time with founder member Carol Pemberton of Birchfield based a cappella quintet BLACK VOICES and asks.....**

## **How was your tour in Vietnam?**

Really good thanks. Black Voices made two visits, first in October 2012 as part of the Queen's Jubilee celebrations. We performed both in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, at the Opera houses and workshops with hundreds of school children.

The second visit was in February 2013, to celebrate 40 years of diplomatic relations with the UK there. We have also performed extensively across the east in China, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

We had a feeling that audiences in Vietnam might be polite but not have heard of or be interested in Black Voices' music, but we quickly realised as we sang, people were visibly moved by the songs and this was an indication that in spite of the language barrier, BV's music was able to transcend this and deliver a pleasurable and memorable music experience to its new Vietnamese audience. We presented a mixed repertoire of folk, reggae, jazz, pop as well as traditional strands. There was silence throughout the performance, an atmosphere not too dissimilar to a classical concert, but at the end, they gave BV a hearty 10-minute rapturous standing ovation.

We later learned that such visible appreciation is rare. It was a fantastic feeling to be so well received in a new country and we were blown away with all the great comments from audience members. All the performances in the tours were sold out so BV proved to be a good success as a female a cappella group from the UK and also for The British Council.

The successful performances were followed by extensive coverage on local and national TV channels across Vietnam and the group spent a lot of time being interviewed, even between workshops. Looking back, it was an extremely hectic schedule, especially on the first visit. The second visit they (The British Council) were more merciful, more sympathetic and organized a more relaxed schedule. Vietnam is a fantastic place to

visit.

The south is a frequent destination of choice because of the musical Miss Saigon. It was a more intimate experience in Hanoi for BV, there is a lot more to learn about in the slower paced historic North. In Hanoi we also met more local people, who cooked their local dishes for BV and the group got more of a feel of Vietnamese culture. Five Black Women from Birmingham UK, people never know what to think when they see us, nor what to expect when we open our mouths - it's a surprise to hear the range and diversity of songs we produce and this is one of the greatest rewards working in a group such as BV and seeing the delight on people's faces as we sing.

## **Where next?**

Wherever the roads open - Next year we hope to do an extensive tour in Australia as well as represent Birmingham/the UK in Berma, Jordan and Malaysia with the British Council. We hope to keep going, developing ourselves as people, as women, as singers and to be there for young people who don't have a lot of positive things in their lives to support and encourage them.

**Do you think there will be opportunity to develop an ongoing event for young people who want to sing in Birchfield, with Black Voices?**

We have been running the World Music Youth Choir from our centre during term time every Saturday for over 2 years. It offers young people plenty of opportunity to develop their voice, singing as part of the choir, recording, working with local singer songwriters and also working with a range of professional world musicians. CMAT, now known as Grosvenor Road Studios has a range of facilities offering a range of services, including instrumental tuition serving the Birchfield area. A new partnership with Reach The Charity, Jazba Ltd and Black Voices (UK) has been formed to run the centre and we will continue to offer a range of music and media opportunities to the communities in Birchfield,

Handsworth, Aston and Lozells.

The World Music Youth Choir (WMYC) meets on Saturday mornings from 10-11.30am. The opportunity is free and open to all young people aged 8 – 14 years. There are great opportunities for WMYC to perform at venues across Birmingham and with a range of professional musicians. New members are welcome.

The partnership at Grosvenor Road Studios works with local organizations/agencies including the Big Local in directing people to the centre, with the aim of involving the community in a variety of activities.

It's really surprising that we still come across people who are not aware of what's happening on their own door-step but ho

pefully things like this article will help in this regard.

## **What would be your biggest words of encouragement?**

Be bold if you have a dream or a desire to do something in life. Be confident and go for it. People who have great ideas talent often hide. Sometimes they think it isn't very much and won't be appreciated. Often what's needed is a little bit of support and encouragement. Surely we can at least give them a platform/opening to showcase their talents and skills, and a start maybe having an open evening/weekend at the centre where people can come and share. Hopefully where appropriate, we can help them to develop. We aren't going to get it right for everyone, but we can work to get it right for a few and that could be really powerful for Birchfield.

## **Have you been back to the schools you attended and performed?**

I attended Swanshurst Girls School and have delivered workshops there, giving a little back and giving support and encouragement to students there. North side we work with lots of schools in partnership with Handsworth Association of Schools who are well experienced and a priceless resource for local schools

## **How would you say the CMAT centre has helped the music to progress?**

There's still a lot of work to be done and we have lots of ideas for how we can work more closely with all the communities around the centre to develop music and media ideas/projects. The centre should be a focal point, a hub where people can have access to/gather information about what is going on in Birchfield and the surrounding area and contribute positively to new developments.

## **What's happening for your Jubilee?**

October 2013 will be exactly 25 years in our BV journey and we are planning a reunion for all those who have contributed to where we are now and holding a big party. We are looking at ways to celebrate it and open it up to share it with the public. There is so much film, video footage, and lots of interesting highlights of our work over the years. It will be an emotional look back for both me, and all the women involved, but it will be an incredible milestone celebration. Once the plans and date is finalized, it will be on BV's website, so watch this space!

<http://blackvoices.co.uk>

**Congratulations to you on the 25 years. It's been enjoyable interviewing you. It's been good to reflect and talk about it in a most positive way. It's a message for the youth to take on board when they start something you never know where it will lead to but good things can and do happen!**