

# From hymns to Waka Waka: Tracking this Delhi choir's music evolution

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What started off as a choir comprising wives of ambassadors and diplomats in the capital more than 20 years ago, has gone from singing spiritual hymns in churches to touring the world singing their own rendition of AR Rahman's Tamil hit *Balleilakka* and Shakira's *Waka Waka*. The Capital City Minstrels (CCM) comprises 50 NCR residents who have one thing in common – their passion for music. They meet every Wednesday at the Hungarian Centre of Culture and Information and sing their hearts out under the watchful eye of their current conductor, Carolin Remy, who also teaches music at the German embassy. We caught up with the group during one of their weekly rehearsals before their performance in the capital and along with their musical magic, they told us how they are one big family.

It all started when most of the members of their women's choir had to leave the choir because their husbands got transferred out of Delhi. Says Usha Srinivastava, who has been a part of CCM since its inception, "We organized a farewell concert at the French ambassador's house for the members of the choir, who were leaving town 20 years ago. Our husbands also joined in, and then Zohra Shaw, a member of the women's choir who later went on to become my piano instructor, decided not to shut the choir down. That's when CCM was founded – a piano and a group of 10-12 people around it at my place. We discussed the set list to sing for Christmas over *chai* and biscuits. We started out with our first concert at IIC that year."

## THE EVOLUTION OF CHORAL MUSIC IN THE CITY

As the choir grew, they shifted base to a Green Park church, until they performed at the Hungarian centre 15 years ago. The then director of the centre offered the Hungarian centre as a venue where the rapidly growing group of music lovers from all professional fields – lawyers, ex-pats, doctors, housewives, students – could hold their weekly practice. And that sealed the deal with the Hungarians in Delhi. Today, you can even find the ambassador of Hungary to India flexing his vocal chords during the group's rehearsals. The choir, which started off by



Jiya and Dariel Mathur



Shalu

Carolin Remy, the choir's conductor



Reem Khokhar



Usha

singing primarily hymns at churches and embassies, has evolved with the changing perceptions of choirs abroad. It now indulges in its own version of almost every genre of music with very few accompanying instruments, making it all about vocal power. "We used to do a lot of classical pieces in our initial years. We've gradually added waltz, jazz, pop, R&B, Indian music and even show tunes, just like choirs abroad that perform diverse genres. We're preparing Rahman's *Balleilakka* and we've done *Jai Ho* as well. We've also done Urdu songs, Sufi and Goan numbers. One of the most interesting pieces we did was this African number, *Baba Yetu*, which was used in a video game, which even won a Grammy," says Reem Khokhar, who has been in the choir for four years.

## DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

"We've taken songs from every culture and a huge spectrum of languages in-

cluding French, Hungarian, Italian, Spanish, Korean, Tamil and Konkani. We might not be fluent in these languages, but we all know certain phrases from a plethora of languages, thanks to our set lists over the years," adds Reem. And the choir has seen numerous conductors from various cultural backgrounds – Parsi, French, British... even a Catholic priest!

## OF FAMILY AND LOVE LIFE

While many of the members are new, some have gone, done their corporate gig and returned, while others still try their best to manage their time and pursue their passion. "I was a financial and investment consultant with a real estate company and I stopped singing for a bit. I realised that I couldn't stay away from my music and quit my corporate job and started my own business. I joined the group back, and it was like I never left. It was like coming home to my family.

What's more, the two great loves of my life have been because of this choir – I met them here and I dated them for six-and-a-half and three-and-a-half years, respectively. So, for me, it was family and then some!" says Neeraj, a Shaheed Bhagat Singh College (DU) graduate. Adds Dariel Mathur, an eye surgeon based in Delhi, "I have two kids and juggling my work, household and practices is quite difficult, but practices are once a week, so I manage. I was already a doctor when I joined 19 years ago. The choir is like a family to me. Not only do we share a passion for music, but food as well! We used to laugh about calling ourselves the Capital City Munchies because we ate so much during practice!" Adds Ankur Dang, who is currently pursuing her MA in International Relations from South Asian University in the capital, "I am a part of several choirs – Neerana included. But college is quite time-consuming these days, so I might just have to drop something. I don't want to leave CCM, because it's so much like a family."

## DELHI MUSIC SCENE AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Speaking about the evolution of the music scene in general in Delhi, Neeraj says, "Yes, the music scene has changed a lot, and it is much better now than it was 10 years ago. There is more scope now, more schools, more gigs and more work, especially with so many restaurants and pubs opening up and playing host to a plethora of musicians and acts. But truth be told, even today, if you want to make it big in the music scene in India, you have to move to Mumbai. It's Bollywood land and all, but even Bollywood has opened up to more genres and isn't typically *jhintak*. The music scene in Delhi is still kind of disorganized and you hear complaints about musicians not getting paid on time, etc."

Pics: Ranjit Kumar