

# Alternative Roots

Four people turned up to the choir's first rehearsal



## The Voice Of The Streets

Britain's only homeless choir is finding harmony in music

The harmonies of Ben E King's Stand By Me are floating down a Kings Cross back street, emerging from behind a pair of thick wooden doors.

Inside, twenty people are clicking their fingers and singing a rousing version of the sixties classic. It's Monday evening – rehearsal night for Britain's only homeless choir.

What began life as an advert in London homeless magazine The Pavement ('Can you sing? No? Oh well, come along anyway!'), has now become a fully fledged choir, complete with many members and a trio of concerts under its belt.

Led by 33-year-old Marie Benton, the choir first met four-and-a-half-months ago, when Benton decided to merge her hobby directing a gospel choir with her day job working in a hostel for homeless people.

"I just realised it was something nobody was doing," she says, "and singing makes you happy, basically. I spoke to a few homeless people, and they all thought it was a good idea, so I put out the advert. Four people turned up to the first rehearsal."

The choir – 'The Choir With No Name' – quickly tripled in size, and their raucous performances soon saw them being booked to perform around London, including Camberwell's festival of music and arts, Bonkersfest.

Michelle Constantinidou, 30, joined to help kick her drug habit. "I'm recovering from rather bad drug addiction, and joining the choir gave me something to do," she says.

"My whole life has revolved around people that were using drugs. It's great to meet with people that aren't. It was a really positive move for me, and it's a laugh! I've been clean for four months now."

Run entirely on the kindness of Benton's family and friends, choir members have a meal cooked from scratch for them after their rehearsal, and are accompanied by professional musicians.

Their repertoire includes anything from Garis Barkley's Crazy to songs written by members of the choir.

In the coming weeks they will be having

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workshops with hugely respected musician and conductor Suzi Digby, and one-on-one tutoring from a gospel tutor.

Benton's ultimate dream is to take the choir to Australia, to do a double bill performance with Melbourne's homeless Choir Of Hard Knocks.

A surprising by-product of the choir has been the formation of many new friendships. Through working towards their collective goal the group have developed a strong and supportive community spirit.

For 37-year-old James Green, the weekly rehearsals have become a lifeline. "For me, Monday nights have become fundamental," he says. "Nothing would be the same if there weren't Monday nights – it's a landmark in the week: something to look forward to. The guys in the choir are great, every single one of them, whatever their background or story."

The choir's website will be up and running soon. For more info call Marie on 07941 260874

## The Truth On Tap

With the UK's tap water a world-beater, an advertising guru is lifting the lid on the bottled variety

Two in every five bottles of water are in fact filtered mains water, flogged back to you with a mark-up of 3,000 per cent.

"Whether it's filtered mains water or French glacial melt, it's still selling ice cubes to the Eskimos – you can get it free in your home!" laughs Joshua Blackburn, founder of the We Want Tap campaign.

An advertising guru by day, the 34-year-old Londoner is turning the marketing techniques of the multi-million bottled water industry back on itself, by effectively re-branding tap water.

"Obviously it's nonsense," he admits. "It's like branding air, but it's a way of engaging people at the consumer level, because it's brands that people are buying."

As silly as it sounds, his campaign has a serious message. Tap water uses just 0.3 per cent of the energy needed to produce bottled water, with none of the plastic waste. Of the 13 billion plastic bottles sold in the UK last year, only 10 per cent were recycled while the rest was incinerated or dumped in landfill.

According to scientists, tap water in the UK is some of the highest quality in the world. And it tastes good, too. When Decanter magazine conducted a blind taste test of 24 water brands, Thames tap water came in joint third.

Aside from the fact that it's more expensive than petrol and has a heavy carbon footprint, bottled water isn't even that clean. Tests by the Natural Resources Defence Council in America found that a third of bottled water brands contained toxins at levels exceeding industry standards. A study by Syracuse University even found that "one fourth of bottled waters had ten times the bacterial count of tap water".

To turn the tide against bottled waters, Blackburn is selling re-usable bottles and giving profits to water projects in developing countries.

"Twenty years ago, people weren't drinking bottled water. Something happened, and that something is advertising," says Blackburn. "Brands are part of our lives, so let's use them as a way of creating change."

For more info visit [www.wewanttap.com](http://www.wewanttap.com)

