

MEETING BAZIL MEADE MBE: "MUSIC ABSOLUTELY SAVED MY LIFE"



When Basil Meade MBE founded the London Community Gospel Choir (LCGC) with three other people in 1982, he had no idea how popular the choir would become – nor did he expect LCGC would one day be celebrating its 35th anniversary – especially after their original plan was for the choir to do just a single, one-off performance. Fast forward 35-years, and the choir has travelled far. They've graced the stage at The Brits, Glastonbury and The Grammy Awards. They've also performed at the FA Cup Final and sung in front of both Nelson Mandela and Prince Charles. They've

worked alongside world-renowned artists (Damon Albarn, Nick Cave, Eric Clapton, Elton John, Kylie, Madonna, Paul McCartney, George Michael and Diana Ross – to name a mere few) and they have of course lit up the stage of the Royal Albert Hall before. Now, they return for a very special Christmas celebration.

How does it feel looking back on this journey? "At the beginning there were tough times," Meade says about the choir's pioneering early days, reflective about the initial difficulties they faced. Wanting to take their Christian gospel music to the masses – to all faiths and those without – and with a choir made up of singers who reflected the diverse landscape of London, their tradition-breaking was too much for some at the start. "We were breaking with traditions and we didn't have a bishop as the head of the choir," Meade explains. "There wasn't a church label that the choir used as an identity. It was me: I was the head person and some of the church leaders struggled with that. They thought I was trying to steal their young people! There were a lot of objections to the way we did things but at the same time, it created such a vibe in the community."

This vibe is still evident, especially with demand to be a part of the choir very high (there are

currently almost 80 people waiting to audition); such is the continued excitement around their distinctive style. Whether it's taking well-known songs and performing them through a gospel prism or via their own unique creations, the music of the LCGC has spread far and wide. "The opposition had the opposite effect in fact," Meade smiles. "Young people wanted to be part of this thing because it was different and new. They had never received an opportunity to sing and perform outside of their own organisation's functions. It was an opportunity for them to do something different and it just took off. It was all about change and people don't always like change...people will always oppose something that is fresh and different, or something not going with the status quo."

During his time leading the LCGC, Meade has mentored choir members from a range of diverse backgrounds. The opportunity he now helps to facilitate is one he himself had as a teenager, during a particularly difficult time in his life. "Music absolutely saved my life," Meade says, speaking about his experience with gospel as a teen at a time when he was struggling with life at home. Arriving in London as a schoolboy from Montserrat, Meade left home in his teens and felt entirely lost – until he found gospel music and a mentor. "I wasn't enjoying family life

at one point, during my teenage years and not long after I left school. That's when life was at its most challenging for me. Thank God, someone saw some good in me and kind of directed me towards gospel music. They became my mentor, my mother and the person who loved me the most and showed me that I had something to offer the rest of civilisation. That's where my life really began and things kicked off."

Awarded an MBE in 2017 for "services to music, especially the development of British gospel music," Meade says the importance of mentoring in helping to turn his life around was crucial. The current cuts in arts education funding, he says, are ones that could be detrimental to future generations. "In the schools, there are not enough teachers to teach children music. There is a huge difference between a school where there is music and one that doesn't have it. Children have more confidence when they are making music, whether they are singing or playing instruments."

"I have seen people come into the choir who are lacking in confidence. They have all the talent but they're just not confident with themselves. It's a joy to watch them gradually unfold. They are a different person to when they first joined

because being in an environment where you feel you have a kinship with those who are there and you find you have all this stuff in common – that is what human beings need. They need community...you grow from that."

Creating a diverse community was at the heart of what Meade did back in 1982, bringing together people from an array of backgrounds, all united by their Christian faith. This unity, Meade details, has become vital in counteracting the social divisions emerging in our communities at this difficult time politically. "Every member of the choir is someone who believes in the Christian faith and that unity and shared belief is something we show through the music and the performances that we do. Having that unity amongst people of different skin colours and cultures is a powerful thing for me because in the current political arena, there is so much going on to separate and segregate people."

"I believe as musicians and artists, as creative people we are counteracting that. It might not seem like a big movement but I think we are counteracting it internationally...in Europe in particular, where people of different skin colours are passionately embracing gospel music and singing it, no matter if you're black, white,

Asian or whatever race you may be. You have something in common."

A part of this counteraction comes, Meade thinks, by performing to multi-faith audiences and working with non-Christian artists too. "I think it is so important to do that and one of my past goals was just all about getting out there, not performing only with other Christian artists but non-Christian artists as well because it gives us the opportunity to let them see what Christians are like and what faith people are like because we are very talented...I think as gospel artists, we need to get access to the industry so that more people can hear the music and see us as normal, everyday people." Indeed, a large number of the choir's audience are not from a Christian background at all. "And I absolutely love that," Meade says. "One of my goals has been in normalising our work."

Access to the industry indeed came in time – not least through their work with artists like Paul McCartney, Elton John, Madonna and Damon Albarn. Their list of collaborations is impressive but it was one with Luther Vandross that continues to stand out for Meade. "Twenty-five of my members worked with Luther for practically a week, preparing for his last concert album which he did at the Royal Albert Hall

years ago. Most of the artists that we worked with before sent the MD, or they had a backing vocalist who came and taught the parts to the choir. He didn't do that."

Vandross, Meade remembers fondly, did everything for the collaboration himself. "He came and taught the choir for about three days. We rehearsed and he was there every day doing it all. He interacted with the choir, cracked all the jokes but also kept his distance allowing them time to work too. He demonstrated to the choir what he wanted from the music. It was a lesson, an invaluable lesson, that my choir received. Those who are still around who were there have never, ever forgotten it. He was an amazing man, a beautiful person. His voice is still one of the most amazing male voices I have heard in my life. Listening to him in the room was like listening to one of his records – that velvet voice."

For all the choir's compositions (they have released over a dozen albums since their initiation) Meade says they like to put their own original, gospel signature on famous compositions they cover when they are not writing their own. "I always like to stamp my personality on the song. I tell my choir 'Whenever you do cover a song, there should be something of you in it.' You need to put your personality into it so we can hear that you have been inspired to personalise the song – it's important to do that...we are influenced by the songs from African American choirs because

they are the ones setting the pace. We sing their songs, but we must write our own story. We must tell our story, always. If not, then you are not a genuine artist."

These themes of originality, diversity and celebration will form the core of their show at the Royal Albert Hall. Meade elaborates: "the guys are very excited about the arrangements we have done. We have a version of the 'Hallelujah Chorus' which is going to be a bit of a showpiece and the highlight of the event I think. It was actually arranged by one of the guys from 'Take 6' and produced by Quincy Jones. It's really special to us."

Meade says he plans to get everyone involved at the event and also has plans to bring together artists from across London at the event – neatly mirroring the ethos of the choir's beginnings. "There will also be some communal singing – we always get our audiences singing! – and I have also invited a group of street dancers, 'Young Leaders' from Waltham Forest and a children's choir from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. We are doing some carols with the LCGC touch too. The audience should expect to be on their feet, clapping and singing along!"

What about the next 35 years? "Oh dear – I'll be leading on my Zimmer-frame!" Meade laughs. "We are halfway through a new album that's full of covers and original songs. We are hoping to get some guests on it from the people we have worked with over the years. It's sounding



Bazil Meade receiving his MBE in 2018.

fabulous at the moment and we are very excited about it. We are also planning a tour where gospel meets Baroque with an orchestra in Holland. It will be a very interesting collaboration and I always love collaborations."

In fact, it's those collaborations that Meade sees as crucial to their unique sound. "Working with these guys has enabled me to connect with audiences in a way that staying in a church environment would never do," Meade says, and he already has plans for his next. Right now though, he's looking forward to the Christmas event at the Hall. "It's always a privilege working with other people and performing at venues like the Royal Albert Hall and others. The effort we have put in...you cannot appreciate what we went through to get into those places from a small set up 35 years ago. It's incredible what we've achieved."