



So...podcast – Episode # Danielle Matthews – Choir of Hard Knocks

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Danielle: (Sung) So...podcast, so entertaining. Learning and gaining wisdom with So...podcast, sharing your stories. Everyday glories here with John.

John: Oh my goodness. I'm feeling so happy. Danielle Matthews, thank you so much for that jingle.

Danielle: Not a worry.

John: Welcome to So...podcast, that was so cool.

Danielle: It came to me last night at about 10 o'clock, it just came to me so I'm glad you like it.

John: I love it and I hope the audience did too. Obviously, I've invited you on the show for so many reasons. Number one, you're a nice person, you're doing some amazing stuff around music and singing. We spoke about self-introductions and they can be really mixed and, you know. It's not about waving flags but for the audience who are listening around the world, if you'd be so kind to talk about your love of music and what your head space is now. And you're in Melbourne, Australia of course.

Danielle: Yep, absolutely. Well, yeah, I guess, a little bit about myself. I grew up always just loving music, it was never a question for me about, you know, what will I do? Will I go into music or, ... There was no choice really, it was just, I was kind of born singing and it was just a natural path for me. There's no question, that's just the way I always knew that I was going to head. And so I went and I did music





theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts and I graduated and got into the music theatre industry. And I've been a professional singer for, geeze, I had my first professional gig when I was probably about 15 so I reckon I've been a professional singer for almost about 20 years and I can't really imagine, I can't really imagine doing anything else. It's taken me all around the world, I've met the most amazing people and I really have been very blessed to be able to do what I do, basically.

And then just recently, I became the artistic, co-artistic director with Adam Przewlocki of the wonderful Choir of Hard Knocks which of course was a huge honour and, yeah, pretty exciting. Because I remember watching that show when I was like, in my, oh, about 20 or something like that. And it was just, it just blew me away. I was so moved by that show and I would never have thought that then that would be me, you know, down the track.

John: Sure. The Choir of Hard Knocks has been around how long? I was saying 15, 20 years.

Danielle: Yeah. It's about, I think about 14 years. I should know that shouldn't I?

John: It doesn't matter.

Danielle: It would be about 14 years now, yeah.

John: Yeah. And it is a lovely story. For those people who don't know, and I may not get this right, but obviously it's a group of people who have had their own individual journeys in their life and I'll use words like struggle street or other parts of their journey which hasn't been easy.

Danielle: Yeah.





John: But overall, how, what's your pitch when people say, who are the Choir of Hard Knocks? What's it about? What's your pitch?

Danielle: Well I guess I would just say the Choir of Hard Knocks are a group of people that come from all different backgrounds. It initially started out, for those of you that saw the documentary, predominately for people living on the streets. But it has really grown a lot from there and now I'd say that we have people that come from disadvantage, we have people that have suffered domestic violence. We've also got people, a lot of people that come to us because of chronic illness or they are stroke survivors and their lives have been impacted in a big way. We have a lot of people with mental illness and issues with their mental health, and choir is something that lifts their mental health and really helps them in that regard. So, yeah, I can't pinpoint it, we have people from all walks of life, all ages, for different reasons. We have some people with vision impairment, that's why they're there. Yeah, all sorts of different, it's, we're a real mixed bag these days which is really fantastic.

John: Danielle, with music and events and gigs, performances, for yourself but also Choir of Hard Knocks, after the crowd have clapped and, you know, that's an experience in itself because you're sitting back and listening to the audience.

Danielle: Mm hmm.

John: And I image there's another level after that. The crowd have stopped clapping, you've packed up, you go back to your rooms, you go back to the green room, go back home, can we talk a little bit about that energy? So even after your gig, you know, you go home to say you had a really good night, had a ball, but does another level of personal energy kick in for you?

Danielle: That's a good question. Yeah, sometimes. It's an interesting one. Sometimes after an extreme high of a performance, etcetera, you





can be met by extreme lows as well, also, which is something that performers have to deal with a lot because of course, you know, it's that sort of old saying in a sense, what goes up must come down.

John: Yes.

Danielle: And sometimes the higher you've been up, the further it is to fall. Especially if it's something that you've been sort of putting all your energy and focus into for a long time, which often happens, you know, when you have these big performances sometimes, it becomes your whole life focus for a while. It certainly can. And those are the times where the aftermath, you know, you can have a couple of days of feeling pretty depleted, pretty burnt out too, because you've lost that frenetic energy and you've had that big high and then it's done, and then you've got to find some balance of normality and reality until you then repeat that process all over again.

So, yeah, that can be a difficult one to manage and you get, I think you get better at it. Well, I think you get a little bit better at managing it the more you perform, of finding ways around it and counteracting that sort of rollercoaster that you kind of know is a part of the experience.

John: What sort of briefing happens for members of Choir of Hard Knocks? You've spoken about your own experience, the ups and downs but obviously those people that go back to their normal life, which may not be great, any feedback from them as far as their journey after the event?

Danielle: Yeah, that's a very interesting point. It's not something that I've ever talked to them about. So, I'm not sure, to answer your question there. It's not something, it's funny, that even what you, the question you asked is not something that I don't think, or many performers often always consciously think about it, it's just





something that goes with the territory a bit, I guess. But I find for the Choir particularly, that they, I mean, I can't speak for all of them but I find for them, the high tends to carry over for a lot longer, ...

John: For sure.

Danielle: ... than perhaps for us who were also sort of, like, preparing it and directing it and all that sort of stuff. But for those guys who are purely just up there performing it, I found that actually, often the high can carry over for them for like a week which is fantastic. And it will often buoy them over to the next rehearsal almost.

John: Okay.

Danielle: Which is, ... But that's an interesting question that you raise, it might be something that I actually ask them in the future.

John: Yeah.

Danielle: Yeah.

John: I must admit, I do a lot of work in the area of advocacy and advocacy school, we talked about people's inner batter that gets charged before you take on to be an advocate, or even self-advocate. But when your battery is fully charged and you've had a really high, it is about how their energy stays there for quite a while, which is lovely.

Danielle: Yes. Yeah.

John: So I think for what you're describing is those people have got big batteries and they get a good charge and it stays with them longer.

Danielle: Exactly. I think that is the case and I think sometimes too, that when, and that's the beauty of Choir of Hard Knocks, because





they're so supported, you've got this amazing support team, the Choir Angels who, you know, help get people on stage. You know, from that to preparing lunches and just being mum, you know, at Choir rehearsals. So the beauty of the concerts we do, they're so well supported that all the Choir of Hard Knocks need to think about is just being there and being themselves, and singing. So I hope that for them, because it doesn't, ... So for us, I guess, sometimes, like I said before, who are sort of orchestrating the whole thing and have all the worries of everybody, making sure, you know, this is remembered and that we have this music and that the sound people are doing their job, all that, they don't have that concern, they don't have that drain part which is great, we don't want them to have that.

So for them, it's just a purely, I hope, most of the time, feeling non-stressful, positive environment and experience that carries them over. I think for me it's different because of the amount of energy that's put in sometimes, I can suffer a bit of burnout after it. So, yeah, I think it's really different being the director of a group and being in the group because I've experienced both as well and it's a wonderful thing, sometimes, to be in the group and just to be able to get up and perform and not have all those other worries, I guess. Yeah.

John: Sure. I'm learning and listening a lot right now, Danielle, about yourself, that you get joy from making people feel good with song and this leads me to the amazing song called 'I've Never Been To Me'. Now hopefully lots of people have seen on YouTube but for those that haven't, a little bit of background please.

Danielle: Well, I mean, I think probably at this point, I've just put it up on YouTube, most people have seen it through Facebook and it being shared through there. But basically I decided a while back to post a video on the Bin Isolating Outing page and for those of you who don't know what that is, it's this fantastic page and a lady from





Queensland, Danielle Askew, her name's also Danielle, started. And it was originally just for her community, for her friends, during lockdown where the only thing you had to do, the only outing you have is to go and put your bin on the nature strip so why not dress up and, you know, have a great time with that.

So, people started doing it and it was crazy. It became this phenomenon around the world. Within weeks she had millions, sorry, a million people in this group. And I decided that I might do, instead of dressing up and taking a photo, I thought why not do a bin, like, spectacular music number. Why not? So I did that and it kind of just exploded, like, I just had, I put it up and within like half an hour I think, 2,000 people had liked it and it just kept growing and growing and I had thousands of comments just saying, oh, we love this, you know, can you do more. So for seven weeks, I did a different bin themed song through May and June and then I got a bit burnt out from it, you know, it was actually quite a lot of work.

John: Sure.

Danielle: And, you know, I thought we'd be coming out of lockdown, we sort of were and things started to look like they were picking up, and then they didn't. And then obviously lockdown became more extreme here in Melbourne and it got cold, ...

John: Yep.

Danielle: ... and I just bunkered down for a while and just thought, I need, at this point, to just be focusing on me and not thinking about cheering up others or, you know, I just needed to take care of myself and not have the pressure and not have the stress. So I really did that, sort of through, particularly, the later half of June and then July, August. And then my partner said to me, I think it's time, I think it's time to do another one. I think it would be good for you and it would be good for others. So I decided to get in my bin, it's a clean bin by the





way, my council's wonderful, they know I make these videos so they gave me clean bins. And I wrote the parody lyrics to 'I've Never Been To Me' by Charlene, and I called it 'I've Never Bin To Me'. And literally within 48 hours, it had a million views and just went, yeah. Now it's got millions of views, just that one video. And it just resonated with people, it just spread like wildfire, which was really cool. Because it was just about, it was real, and I didn't pretend to be smiley even, or, I just literally wrote down my experiences and sung them and they are funny because they're true, and they're real, ...

John: They are.

Danielle: and people can relate to it, I think. You know. So, ...

John: Yeah. No, it put a smile on my face and that's what caught my eyes, I need to connect with this beautiful person.

Danielle: Yeah.

John: So a big congratulations from me, you've done well.

Danielle: Thank you.

John: I'm going to put you on the spot, any chance we can have a couple of words with your piano in front of you, on that? Just to, whatever, no warning, just two lines, four lines, whatever.

Danielle: From the song?

John: Yes please. Pressure.

Danielle: Yeah, I probably, I don't know on the piano, I don't know what, I actually don't know what the chords are but I can sing you a little bit without the backing.





John: That's even better still, go for it.

Danielle: So I'll just sing you a little bit.

John: That's all.

Danielle: (Sung) I'm Bin lady, I've bin crazy, cursing at my life because I'm still here stuck in Melbourne, and I lie awake at night, and I close my eyes so much and dream of times past by. But I still wake up in Victoria so I whinge a lot and cry.

There you go.

John: Love it. Thank you Danielle, there was no warning there but thank you for that, ...

Danielle: That's alright.

John: ... I'm sure people are going to say, oh my God, I am going to listen to that. Danielle, we've spoken a lot about how music has enhanced your life and enhances other peoples, I just wonder how models such as Choir of Hard Knocks can start around the world? What I'm meaning by that, there are other people that are listening, different countries that are aware of groups of people who may do gardening, may do art therapy, may do different types of therapy. It can be really simple, can't it, to set something like this up?

Danielle: Yeah, well I mean, after the big documentation back in 2006 or 7 about the Choir of Hard Knocks, it sort of went worldwide. I know now that there are choirs all around the world that are made for people with a disadvantage, that weren't there before that are there now. So even just that alone, just sparked, there's one in San Francisco, there's one in London, there's choirs all around the world now that are there for either the homeless of the disadvantaged,





etcetera, which is so fantastic. So one idea can just spark a change around the world and that's exactly what Choir of Hard Knocks did. But you know, it doesn't, Choir of Hard Knocks has become something really big but it just, it doesn't start out that way, it often just starts with three people in a hall, a local hall somewhere, you know, and one person that has a skill that wants to share and offer that.

So, yeah, I encourage anybody to, and it doesn't have to be with singing, obviously, whether you're great at art and you love teaching that, or whatever it is, yeah, there's plenty of opportunities to use your skills and help people that would like to access that kind of thing but may have more of a struggle in accessing that, in a mainstream kind of way. It's, yeah, it's really not that difficult if you want to, you could even start something literally from your own home with a friend or two that needed the help, or.

John: Sure.

Danielle: And then, you know, it may grow from there.

John: It reminded me actually, as you were talking, of a story I heard where people who have had a stroke and have lost the ability to talk, however their brain did enable them to sing.

Danielle: Yes.

John: So, they could, did you see that?

Danielle: Yeah.

John: It was many years ago but it's something that stuck in my head, where people can sing but they can't talk.





Danielle: This is a very similar phenomenon that happens often with dementia or Alzheimer's patients. You've got, you know, people that are sometimes non-verbal but if you play a song from their childhood or from their early adulthood that they really loved, they can sing the whole song. It's a different part of the brain there and it's quite extraordinary. I can remember actually, my ex-boyfriend's grandfather, I was very close with him and he was a brilliant man, he was a physicist and he was a top physics lecturer at Melbourne University. He wrote lots of books, absolutely brilliant. And he got dementia for the last couple of years of his life and it was really heartbreaking to watch this incredibly brilliant man sort of fade away. But he had this love of classical music and it was extraordinary just the way, the music never, never left. You'd take him to a piano for example and he'd just light up with joy and he could sing or hum along to all his favourite classical pieces and he'd literally go from this sort of shell to just being this animated man filled with joy. And it's, yeah, pretty incredible really. Yeah.

John: Danielle, I would like to self-indulge again and hear the So...podcast jingle before we close.

Danielle: Okay.

John: If you don't mind.

Danielle: Sure.

John: It's just a lovely song.

Danielle: Did I get it right?

John: And on that, I will say farewell and thank you for being on the So...podcast show. Hopefully you've enjoyed it. Have you?





Danielle: I have, thank you. It was a really nice honest chat and it even made me think about a few things that I'd never considered before. It got me thinking, which is always a good thing so, thank you. I appreciate it.

John: Lovely. So folks, I've been talking with Danielle Matthews who's an amazing song writer, performer in Melbourne Australia. And I was very lucky that she's developed a jingle for the So...podcast show. And I'll say goodbye to everybody. Thank you, Danielle. And leave it with you, Danielle.

Danielle: (Sung) So...podcast, so entertaining. Learning and gaining wisdom with So...podcast, sharing your stories. Everyday glories here with John.

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