

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - JAMES SILLS (Katie Elliott & James Sills)

My guest today is James Sills, a musician and vocal leader with a passion for bringing people together to sing. James leads a number of weekly open-access choirs and delivers vocal workshops for groups and organisations across the UK. He's also a speaker and the author of the book: *Do Sing: Reclaim Your Voice and Find Your Singing Tribe*. As a performer, James is a member of the all-male acappella troupe *The Spooky Men's Chorale* and a contributing songwriter and member of *Rough Island Band*, a contemporary folk quartet based in Isles of Scilly.

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James Sills, good morning!

Hi there. How are you doing?

I'm really well, thank you. I'd love to know, what has led you to the work that you do today?

Well, I think the dual path has been the musical path - so, you know, growing up as a musician and playing a lot in school and taking a music degree - but also I think it's been a real deep love, really, for feeling part of something and feeling part of community. So when I was a young lad, that was singing on the football terraces with my dad and that feeling of just being part of something bigger, or when I was at school playing - whether it was in the school jazz band or with your group of friends or singing in my village church when I was younger - just that sense of being part of something and sharing something together. And I think you realise things in hindsight, but actually what I'm doing with my singing is essentially community building through songs, so in a way the music is a vehicle for something else. So I think that even though my background isn't, you know, I'm not a choral scholar, I have never really formally studied singing, but I've always really held the power of community to be very important and I think, particularly in today's society where to some extent we're becoming more and more atomised, we need to come together and I think singing is just one of the most positive ways of doing that.

I absolutely agree with you. Have you got any examples of special moments when you've helped to bring people together to sing?

Without sounding a bit overblown, you know, pretty much every rehearsal is a special moment. If I think of particular groups I'm working with at the moment, my

most recent project has been to help set up and run a choir in Wrexham, which is my nearest town here in north Wales, for people who've experienced homelessness and other forms of marginalisation and a big part of the singing experience is the eating and drinking together. So it starts with, you know, we all kind of have a cup of tea and then the singing starts and then we have lunch together and that really brings people together for whom the need for stability and something positive and community is just so, so important and it's just been absolutely wonderful. It's been running for several months now and I just look forward to it so much every Wednesday. It's a really brilliant atmosphere of people coming together - and people who are having pretty hard times.

It's a great leveller, I think, making music with people. I used to work a lot with people who have dementia, largely because both my parents had dementia and I did a lot of music with both of them, but I used to go in and do interactive sessions with people and just had some really beautiful experiences with people who found it very difficult to do things like form a sentence or remember anything at all, but could still sing along. And actually, right towards the very end of my mum's life, she could still sing *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* with almost all the words, despite the fact she didn't know who we were.

So you had that point of connection with them...

Absolutely. Singing and dancing...

...where regular verbal communication might not have been there. Yeah. It's just singing is so hardwired into our brains. I mean there's a lot of science out there that you can read about it, but the auditory system starts developing in the womb and it's one of the last things to leave at the end of our lives and there is a growing realisation of this, which is fantastic. So there is more and more work, people going into places like dementia wards and I think it's fantastic. Another example I was going to give as well, because singing and music is so powerful for those people who really perhaps need it the most in some ways such as people who come to my homeless choir people who are experiencing dementia, but also for very different demographics. You know, so I run an all male choir and guys who might email me, saying, "I'm having a really tough week" - and I've got people who are solicitors or accountants, people who live really pretty full-on, stressful lives - and for them the singing together for an hour or two each week, someone described it as their therapy. You know, it's not just like a pleasurable pastime, but it's actually something really fundamental and is really, really good for them as individuals. So I think if my takeaway is anything it's that singing, is really important for everybody, like no matter who you are because, you know, we all need that sense of release, we all

need that sense of community but for some people like we've been talking about it's particularly valuable.

Yeah. And I think also it's not about whether you think you can sing or not, that's one of the least important things.

Absolutely, yeah. I mean, you know, it's like running. I mean I really see singing and running as quite similar. I mean, I only started running about five years ago because like a lot of people I was put off when a sideways comment by a teacher at school just made me want to stop. It's often the case with people, that's why they stopped singing or for other reasons. And so I had this notion about running that it's about being really fit, looking really great, having the lingo, you know, running as fast as you can. And actually for me it's just about getting your trainers on and feeling good about yourself, feeling that you've achieved something, getting those endorphins going. And singing and running, we've all got the equipment already, you know, we've got our voices. You don't have to have some expensive trainers to go out running. And I think singing has, in some ways been commodified and commercialised so much in the West to the point that people just don't want to do it because they're told messages, whether it's through TV programmes or whatever, that it's not for them. And that there's only a tiny percentage of people who can sing - and it's rubbish.

So from both of us - that's just not true.

Exactly, from Katie and James, you heard it here.

So trust us, because we're pretty sure we know about that one! What's one thing that you've learned that helps you to do your best work?

I think it's to know why you're doing it and who you're doing it for, whether it's, you know, running a choir rehearsal or whether it's writing a blog post or doing a podcast, but know what your motivation is. So with choirs, there are a lot of people who run choirs, for whom their objective is to get the most "perfect" sound possible at whatever cost- which isn't me being critical of those people, it's just not the way that I do it. So when I'm running my choirs, I need to think about what actually is the objective of today's session? Is it, "We're going to sound great at all costs at the expense of these people having a positive experience?" For example, if I'm going to my workplace choir, I run a workplace in a hospital, it's really important that those people are able to unlock after a busy day, that we laugh together, yeah, that we sound good as well, but it's really important to know why you're doing it. What is the objective of our session and, you know, maybe it's the same with everything with going for a run, it's like, "Well why am I running today? Am I running because I just

want to clear my head? I want to stretch out? Am I running because I really want to push myself or am I running because, you know, I've got a race and I want to get a good time?" Yeah, so I think maybe it's a bit of a designer kind of mindset. I picked that up in the summer - maybe it was Seth Godin who I was listening to speak, but it was: know who you're doing it for and what you're doing it for.

Yeah indeed. Have you ever made a conscious decision to change a specific behaviour and if so, what happened?

I mean, there's been a few, I suppose, but the thing I think is quite interesting is about seven years ago I decided to change my primary mode of listening to music from CD to vinyl.

Really?

Yeah, and I know vinyl is become pretty trendy now and it is great, there's more and more record shops popping up. But I've found that that really changed my relationship with how I listened to music because it forced me to actually really listen and be present when I was listening to whatever it was and it also was one of these things that actually took away, kind of, crippling choice. You know, particularly in the age of Spotify and streaming services, you can listen to pretty much anything that's ever been recorded. And so I would find myself thinking, "Well, what do I want to listen to today?" And you'd be there for about 15 minutes. And then you know, once you put something on you can then skip to another song and then you're back to this state of perpetual distraction. Where with a record, I don't know how many I've got my collection, maybe I've got about 500 records or something, but they're all the 500 records that I know are awesome and will make me happy. And so you kind of pick what you want to listen to for that day and then just let the whole thing run. And the fact that it's in my front room, I can sit on my nice comfy couch and just enjoy that experience so I just feel I've got a more direct relationship with the music, it sounds better as well, but also it makes me stop and be more present when I'm listening to it.

Yeah.

Bringing it back to the singing, that's exactly what singing's about because you're completely immersed in the experience of listening, of if you're watching the conductor or your own voice. And if you're singing in a group, there's not much left of your brain to focus on anything else.

Yeah.

Again, that's why it's so good for you because it's a fairly direct experience, it's not mediated, you know, you're not on your devices. For most of my choirs and workshops I don't give out lyric sheets. I haven't used musical notation for a long time now because I know that that distracts a lot from the purpose when people can't read musical notation and so it's not kind of part of my ethos anymore. And so, yeah, it's that thing of being completely present and immersed in what you're doing and committing to it, because the opposite of that is perpetual distraction and flitting between things, which is really easy to do, particularly with smartphones and our kind of restless brains.

I love that. I think I might have to get my turntable out of the loft now.

Yes! Do it!

Although all the records I've got are, pretty much, 80s pop. I don't know if I would only want to listen to those, but you know, vinyl's back, isn't it?

Yeah, it's back and if you know some good charity shops, you can pick up some real bargains, doesn't have to be all that expensive. So the early days of building my collection up were just amazing because there were, say 100 albums that I had to have. And I found them, most of them for about a fiver or less in second hand record shops or charity shops. Then it becomes a bit harder and then when you buy new vinyl, they're a bit more expensive, but it's just a little thing that I would say has improved my life a little bit.

Wonderful, thank you. So what would your *Little Challenge* for our listeners be? So a *Little Challenge* is something that most people could reasonably do. It's affordable. It's not too physically demanding. It would take no more than 10 minutes of their time and it would be life enhancing in some way if done regularly. What would your *Little Challenge* be?

My *Little Challenge* would be to just create a bit of space for yourself in the day, and it could be either of these two things or you could combine them. The first thing is just breathe and be really conscious of your breathing. And in particular breathe in through your nose and breathe out, slowly, for a longer amount of time than you breathe in - so you could maybe breathe in for two counts and breathe out for, say, eight counts, which will slow you down. It'll oxygenate your blood, it'll bring you into the moment. You know, particularly at times if you're stressed or you're anxious, this is when you need it most, you know, carve out that time for yourself and just really inhabit yourself. You know, going back to being present... But also, get outside as well. See the sky. Realise that we're not trapped in, literally and metaphorically as well. So if you're able, maybe at the start of the day, if you're able just to get outside, maybe find a quiet space or go for a walk and just be really conscious with

your breathing. I think it's just like a little life win where you've just created a little bit of headspace for yourself. You'll slow your breathing down. Yeah, your head'll clear and I think we all need those little moments in the day and that's something that's free and that we can all access. I realise, you know, we don't all live in the hills in Wales, but that was part of the reason that I chose to live here because there's lots of sky and there's lots of space, but equally if you live in big cities, you could find a park for 10 minutes on your lunch break, or just that thing of breathing. And it's actually something that I do at the start of all my singing sessions just to help bring the singers into the room. Slow everybody down a little bit and just arrive in yourself - and it's something we can all do.

Wonderful. Thank you so much for that. I imagine people might well want to find out more about what you do and where they can find you. So how's the best way of finding you online or in person?

Well, if you want to find me in person, I live on Hope Mountain in north Wales.

That's a real place? Hope Mountain?

It is a real place, yes. You might have to look quite hard for me because there's a lot of sheep and trees, but I will be there somewhere. So yeah, so I run choirs and singing workshops regularly, details of which can be found on my website which is jamessillsmusic.co.uk. And that's got information about my different projects - performing projects such as Rough Island Band and Spooky Men's Chorale and also links to my Do Lectures talk. And I'm on Instagram as well, so there's quite a few pictures of big open skies and that's not just music-centred on Instagram - that's [@jsillsmusic](https://www.instagram.com/jsillsmusic). And then I'm also on Twitter and I have a Facebook page and they're more centred just on my musical projects.

But you're not just doing music in the north Wales area, but you've also been doing some in New York recently?

Yes, in the summer and I'm actually going to do some more. So yeah, I went at the invitation of Tina, aka Swiss Miss, who runs an amazing organization called Creative Mornings, which I encourage your listeners to check out, and I went over in August and facilitated music making around the fire and at workshops and wherever I could at their annual summit, which was incredible. Working with 300 volunteers from 50 different countries, bringing them together through singing as part of their biannual meet-up, which was amazing. And yeah, I'm going back next week and I'm going to be just doing what I do. I'm going to be talking about how singing brings us together, but mainly getting everybody in the room singing, so I'm going to be coercing them into singing.

Coercing in the nicest possible way, I can imagine.

Oh yeah. Very gently, very gentle coercing. Yep.

Fantastic. James, thank you so much for your time.

Thank you.