

## A Letter from our Founder

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Dear Members and Friends of the Chorus,

Welcome to the second edition of our new incarnation of *Chorus Notes*. We hope you enjoyed the first issue and will continue to enjoy hearing about what's new with the Chorus.

I'm sure I speak for the entire Chorus when I say preparing for this June's concert has been pure joy. The music is absolutely wonderful; we're all having a good time. And I'm really looking forward to working with Bob Dee and his band again. Bob is a great rock musician and he and his band, Cosmosis, bring so much experience and style to our performances. One of the benefits of being in the musical community in a place like New York City is being part of a network with access to many great performers. Over the years, we've worked with some top-notch people—singers and instrumentalists. Many, like Bob Dee's Cosmosis, have worked with us on more than one concert, which gives the chorus the opportunity to feel they are also part of this rich legacy.

This music has also been a revelation to me. Just as last spring's music of early rock 'n' roll was only peripherally known to me, so have been this spring's tunes from the Stonewall Inn jukebox in the summer of 1969, and from the lineup at the Woodstock festival later that summer. I grew up in a very conservative church. Dancing was not allowed. So when my school peers were learning to social dance to the music of Elvis and the Platters and the Beach Boys, I stayed away. In the summer of 1969, when the Stonewall riots broke out, and later that summer when hundreds of thousands of hippies gathered upstate to hear Janis Joplin, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, and the other musical icons of the day, I was in Appalachia earning my last year of tuition for a religious college—by selling Bible books door to door.

That fall, I recall being shocked by an article in *Time* magazine reporting the rise of homosexuality in New York City. Looking back, I realize that article—which I remember as being dismissive—was a response to the Stonewall riots. In these 50 years, the LGBTQ community has come a long way, although there's still plenty of room to grow.

I am proud that New York Pride, the producers of New York City's annual Gay Pride Parade, and the hosts of this year's WorldPride celebrations in honor of Stonewall's 50th anniversary, are also sponsoring our concert. It's a recognition of our inclusivity of LGBTQ people and our commitment to diversity.

Diversity, in fact, has always been something I treasure about our chorus. We don't all represent any one group. Never have. We've never asked what you look like, who you pray to (or don't), who you love, or how much money you have. Our only question has always been, "Wouldn't you like to come sing with us?"

We plan to keep it that way.

Jack Eppler

Founder and Director



## THE MUSICAL HEARTBEAT OF THE LATE '60s—"A Summer To Love" and its Rhythms

*"When the moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars. This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius ..."*

**A note from the editor:** As long as I have been in the chorus, each concert has been blessed by the addition of guest artists who amaze us and our audiences with their talent, while inspiring us to give our all. In this issue, two of them, Bob Dee and Michael Wimberly, talk a little bit about what it's like to work with an amateur group like ours. Turns out, not only do they make our experience richer for their musical gifts—we sometimes teach them a thing or two, too!



In 1969, the Fifth Dimension's *Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In*, from the groundbreaking musical "Hair," held a solid second on the Billboard charts. A key part of the soundtrack of the late '60s, it will open the show on June 15, when the New York City Community Chorus pays tribute to the cultural and social explosion that rocked the planet that year, starting with the Stonewall rebellion in Greenwich Village and moving on to the Woodstock festival in New York's Catskill mountains, in its Spring concert, "A Summer to Love."

"The music of early rock is godfather to that of the late '60s and early '70s," said Bob Dee, leader of Cosmosis, the musical trio that grooved with the Chorus last Spring when it celebrated the genre's first appearance on the musical scene. Cosmosis will be along for the ride again, moving forward with the Chorus on the rock n' roll continuum.

Big Mama Thornton's *Hound Dog*, the hard-edged blues-rock style of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's electric guitar, and other early rock numbers set the stage for what became a national movement, composer and guitar player Dee noted. At the time, "the older generation was outraged by the music called rock 'n' roll. Some considered it symbolic of a breakdown of society, but a younger generation saw it as something different: a way to make a LOUD statement about their beliefs, breaking away from traditional norms and stereotypes," he said.

Perceiving injustice in the Vietnam War, racial segregation, poverty and sexual repression, that generation burst open the gates and an era of free love, interracial freedom in relationships, choice of partner and women's rights advocacy followed. That late '60s' zeitgeist, in my opinion, created a like movement of (continued ...)

## A Summer to Love (cont'd.)

explosive creativity and experimentation in music, art and poetry. I think the song *Everyday People*\* by Sly and the Family Stone expresses it well!" (\*Spoiler Alert: On the program for the concert.)



Bob Dee, far right on guitar, with Simon Walsh on bass (center) and Joe Foster on drums, last spring.

Dee will perform *Fire*, a Jimi Hendrix tune, as well as some original songs of his own for the audience. "*Fire* is a hard driving rock tune that really exemplifies Hendrix's style," he said, adding that the band hasn't decided on the final format yet, "but I'd like to include the chorus in my rendition of the song when I write the arrangement."

Including, and backing up, the chorus is a very special challenge—different from working with one vocalist or even a small vocal group. "One-on-one with a singer, you can easily bend, make cues or even extemporize, ebbing and flowing fluidly with the vocalist. When you have a large group of performers, there has to be great direction—the skills to be able to be the go-between that ties the band to the vocal group. Then there is a real physical latency factor—meaning the sound of so many voices at once filling a large room can cause the accompanists to fall behind, or get ahead of, the group rhythmically so the music sounds out of sync. With just one singer or even a quartet, that's impossible—fewer voices to rein in means less saturation of sound," according to Dee. "Jack's job is hard, and gets even harder when you add more musicians."

Bob Dee's Cosmosis came of age way after the '60s—late, late 20th century, to be exact, and since then has evolved in both style and composition, with Dee as its constant. "I love science and feel like I've been a 'musical scientist' over the years, with the band as my laboratory," he says.

Having worked with soloists, small groups and choirs for many years, Dee thinks what's most important is to have "great ears and not forget to be musical at the expense of accompanying. It should all sound like one thing. NOT vocals and accompanists, but ONE single organic entity.

And wasn't that the spirit of those late '60's lyrics? In the words of *Aquarius*—

*Harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding, no more falsehoods and derisions, mystic crystal revelation, and the mind's true liberation ....*

Here's to the summer of '69!

# 1969—Oh What a Year!

## January

20—Richard Nixon sworn in as 37th president of the U.S.

## February

9—First Boeing 747 “jumbo jet” ever built completes its first flight, ushering in a new era of aviation

## March

3—Los Angeles: Sirhan Sirhan admits killing Robert F. Kennedy

10—Memphis: James Earl Ray pleads guilty to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

17—Milwaukee-born Golda Meir is named first female prime minister of Israel

## April

9—Boston: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) seize control of the Harvard Administration building, demanding the end of the school’s ROTC program in opposition to the Vietnam War

## May

25—“Midnight Cowboy,” directed by John Schlesinger, is released.

## June

28—New York City: Riots at the Stonewall Inn mark the start of the gay rights movement in the U.S.

## July

8—First U.S. troop withdrawal made in Vietnam

20—Apollo 11 lands the first man on the moon (Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins man the flight)

## August

15-18—Thousands head to Woodstock for what would become an iconic music event

21—San Francisco: First Gap store opens

## September

2—Rockville Center, NY: First ATM installed

5—William Calley charged with war crimes for My Lai

22—San Francisco Giant Willie Mays ties Babe Ruth’s 600 home run record

## October

5—First “Monty Python” episode broadcast on BBC

29—First message transmitted via ARPANet, the forerunner of the Internet (continued ...)

## 1969 (cont'd.)

### November

- 10—"Sesame Street's" first broadcast airs on NET
- 12—Apollo 12 is the second manned mission to the moon
- 21—Okinawa returned to Japanese control

### December

- 1—First draft lottery held since World War II
- 4—Chicago: Black Panthers Hampton and Clark shot dead by City police
- 6—Northern California's Altamont concert, dubbed "Woodstock West," is hosted by the Rolling Stones and heralds the "end of the sixties". Marked by violence, one concertgoer died of stab wounds, and three others were killed in accidents at the event

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## PERCUSSION PIERCES THE DARKNESS: A Conversation with Michael Wimberly

As joyous and contemplative song heralding the holidays rang out at NYCCC's December concert, "Behold How Good & Pleasant: Together in Harmony," the audience could feel (and hear) the subtle beat of the Djembe, a modern incarnation of a centuries-old traditional West African drum. Behind that beat was composer and musician Michael Wimberly, a longtime chorus collaborator, whose *Kosayambey* had the audience swaying to its exuberant rhythm. *Chorus Notes* caught up with Wimberly for a brief chat recently, at the end of his semester on the music faculty at Bennington College.



**The chorus kept asking about the origins of *Kosayambey*—we wanted to know what we were singing. Can you tell us?**

*This is a song from the Baga people of Guinea—or so it is told. It celebrates the coming together of a couple in marriage. The difficult thing we encountered in learning this folkloric song was...no one knew the meaning! We eventually learned that it's simply a wedding song.*

**Have you performed this particular arrangement before?**

*Yes—back in 2009 at the Yakima Valley Community College in Washington State, led by David Blink. I was involved in a number of projects during a residency there and thought it would be a good idea to try *Kosayambey*, which we did.*

**When you arranged *Kosayambey*, were voice and drums always essential to the piece?**

*Folkloric music from all over the planet has deep traditions using (continued ...)*

## Michael Wimberly (cont'd.)

*the voice and a percussion instrument to express a song. Kosayambey uses the Djembe family of drums for its accompaniment. During a wedding, everyone would participate by singing and harmonizing freely—very much in the moment. Can you imagine what that sounded like? The arrangement I created used four-part harmony, rhythmic counterpoint and lots of repetition to mimic drum patterns.*

### **How did it sound when you first heard our chorus practicing it, before you began accompanying us on the drums?**

*It's a wonderful experience hearing how people interpret notes on a page. There is something magical about imperfection and striving for perfection. You hear note combinations you never thought of before, and that's great! Of course, the goal is to sing all of the notes and rhythms that you created, but sometimes musical accidents happen in rehearsal that are far better than what you composed.*

### **When the drums are added, is the play improvisational—and does the dynamic change with each performance?**

*Yes, the playing is improvised, but the rhythmic foundation that I used is based on a West African rhythm called "Lamba", a very old rhythm played by the Djeli (storyteller) on a harp-like instrument called the Kora. I co-opted the rhythm for Kosayambey. The improvisational embellishments change with each performance, but the Lamba rhythm does not.*

### **How did the piece evolve for you, personally and as we rehearsed for the performance?**

*I learned this song while playing for an African dancer/choreographer, Nafisa*

*Sharriff, during a celebration of Kwanzaa, the annual African-American celebration of the Nguzo Saba, or "First Fruits", as translated from Swahili. The piece evolved for me from that moment when a song or rhythm gets in your soul and becomes a part of you. From there, I was able to imagine and create a thoroughly composed piece, blending a Western esthetic with the African.*

*The NYC Community Chorus evolved the piece at every rehearsal right up through the performance. Throughout the rehearsal period under Jack's conducting, the chorus began to internalize the music until it became familiar. I learned many years ago not to control the music. That only stresses you out. Let the music gradually evolve and celebrate the process and joy of imperfection. There are wonderful secrets in the sound of imperfection that may stimulate your imagination and broaden your outlook.*

### **Tell me a little about your beautiful drum.**

*The Djembe drum is a product of nature. Made by hand from the wood of a tree trunk, and carved into a large goblet shape, it's then covered with goatskin and laced with rope to create tension in the drumhead. Dating back to the Mali Empire of the 11th century, today it can be found all over the world. It has a repertoire as extensive as any other folkloric tradition because it's directly connected to the human voice through language. By this I mean languages of West Africa such as Mandinka, Wolof, Susu and many others, each of which have developed spoken phrases played on the instrument that are still used today. There are endless possibilities of what can be played on the Djembe.*

## SPOTLIGHT

### Twin Peeks: Tenors Mark & Martin Reece

Choruses can always use more tenors—it's definitely the most sought-after voice. So how rare can it be that we have identical twin tenors Mark and Martin Reece in our ranks? *Chorus Notes'* Mary Greenberg sat down with the bros to find out more about their journey to NYCCC, and how it is to grow up with your own carbon copy.



NYCCC tenors Martin (left) & Mark Reece

**CHORUS NOTES:** Is there any telltale way to tell you two apart?

**Mark:** *I'm more likely to start a conversation or smile first. It takes Martin time to warm up to people but when you get to know him, he's the goofy one. I'm more the serious, down-to-earth Zen guy.*

**Martin:** *I agree.*

**CN:** Have you ever played any practical jokes on friends over the years?

**Martin:** *Not really. When we were in elementary school, we were in the same class and our teachers would have us wear nametags the entire semester. I think the idea of us playing practical jokes was up to Mark. I blame him for that.*

**Mark:** *Yes, I'm more the practical joker. We play them on our mother. Often when she calls one of us, I'll pick up his phone or vice versa. Our mother knows our voices so she gets a laugh out of it. I can say that the joke is on others because we always get the question, "Are ya'll twins?" and I'll say, "No, he's my cousin."*

**CN:** Having never sung in a chorus before, what inspired you to join us?

**Martin:** *We saw the movie "Urban Hymn," which we could really relate to.*

**Mark:** *The character lets her circumstances define her until someone comes into her life and encourages her to use a talent she never saw in herself. The actress Letitia Wright does a great job and can sing. Check it out when you get a chance!*

**CN:** How did you find NYCCC, and how long have you been singing with us?

(continued ...)

## Twin Peeks (cont'd.)

**Martin:** *I searched some choruses online and came across your site. Mark and I decided he would go first to check it out—that was 2 years ago. From there, it was the best choice for us.*

**Mark:** *We wanted to join a chorus that was positive and non-judgmental, and we wanted to be around people who love to sing. I like the fact that it's no audition. Just come and sing—that's great in my book!*

**CN:** I don't want to start any sibling warfare here, but which of you has the better voice?

**Martin:** *I still feel like I need more confidence but it depends on the day. Overall, Mark is better for now.*

**Mark:** *Well, since he said something nice about me, I'll say he has the better voice.*

**CN:** How has the chorus enriched your life?

**Martin:** *For two hours, we're singing and laughing at Jack's sense of humor, which is priceless. I enjoy being with the tenors, everyone is nice and it's also improved Mark and my relationship as twins. When I say that, I mean being a twin has its ups and downs. The comparisons and the expectations that one should be like the other is complicated. Right now, having a twin is the best thing ever.*

**Mark:** *I forget all my problems when I sing. I like the fact that I get to sing songs that I would never pick on my own and meet people. It's funny how all of us are strangers who would have walked past each other on the street but we've ended up having one objective. Singing together is great.*

**CN:** Do you have any advice for anyone who's interested in joining the chorus, but may be reluctant or scared?

**Martin:** *Be brave, be bold. If you want to meet nice people, come to the choir. There's no judgment and it's a safe place to sing.*

**Mark:** *Come with no expectations. Even though Martin and I are introverts and very private, we took a chance. You'll be fine!*

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