

LOCAL NEWS, WOMEN

The Women Next Door: Halifax-based lesbian-feminist choir headed to Vancouver for Canada's largest 2SLGBTQIA+ choral festival



BY EVELYN C. WHITE
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The Women Next Door chorus. Credit: Stoo Metz

Hailed as “The First Lady of Song,” Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996) once declared that “the only thing better than singing was more singing.”

The sentiment was echoed during my recent visit with members of The Women Next Door (WND), a Halifax-based a cappella choir. Established in 1992, the queer, non-binary, lesbian-feminist ensemble embraces song as a powerful force for harmony and social change.

“I’m never happier than when I’m singing,” said Sue Atkinson, a founding member of WND.

As for the name of the choir, Carol Putnam, another founding member, explained, “While at practice one evening, a member kept referring to her neighbours, a lesbian couple, as ‘the women next door.’ In the early to mid-90s, [the term] could have implied ‘wink, wink, nod, nod’ or ‘how strange’ or even ‘how weird.’ In any case, we wanted to own the name and express who we were publicly and with pride.”

Out and proud, the 15-voice choir will perform at 3:30pm on May 3 at Rumours Lounge & Cabaret, at 1668 Lower Water St. in Halifax. The “send-off” concert celebrates the group’s upcoming travel to Vancouver for the 2026 **Unison Festival of 2SLGBTQIA+ choruses**, on May 15-18.

WND has sung in every Unison Festival since the inaugural 1998 event in Edmonton, and served as co-host for the 2023 gathering that was held in Halifax.

Admission for the Rumours show is \$3 or pay what you can in support of the venue — a safe space for queer folk in the HRM.

‘Instant community’

Having performed in her Catholic church choir, Vida Jackson said that her dismay with the religion’s inequitable treatment of women prompted her to join WND, a group that doesn’t require auditions, makes decisions by consensus and, in 30-plus years, has never had an official conductor/director.

Instead, guided by their diverse strengths, choir members pitch in (pun intended), as needed for various tasks.

“We share common values and principles,” Jackson said. “Overall, we are an affinity group of women who love to sing.”

A former member of the Prince Edward Island lesbian band Six of One, Silver Frith joined WND after moving to Halifax in 1992, and finding “instant community.”

“It was my first experience with a cappella singing and I appreciated the challenge,” Frith said. The group sometimes performs her original compositions such as “Goddess of Life” and “Danger Zone.”

History and social impact of queer choruses

Ethnomusicologist Heather MacLachlan probes the history and social impact of queer choruses in *[Singing Out](#)* (2020)

“This book asks two important questions,” MacLachlan writes. “Does public concertizing by LGBT community choirs cause a decrease in homophobic attitudes and, thereby, foster a more inclusive society? And by extension, does music making actually change the world?”

For WND member Carrie Melsom, the answer is a resounding “yes.”

Referencing the horrific [1989 Montreal Massacre](#) during which a misogynistic gunman murdered 14 women engineering students and injured 10 others at École Polytechnique, she said: “We are a sisterhood. We sing to give voice to the pain and power that women experience everywhere.”

‘I am willing’

To that end, the repertoire of upcoming WND concerts will include works such as “[Soul Sister](#)” by MaMuse, “[A Beautiful Noise](#)” by Alicia Keys and Brandi Carlile, and “[I Am Willing](#)” by Holly Near.

Near, 76*, was a leading figure in the 1970s -1980s [women’s music movement](#).

“I often get asked if I am a Democrat, a Socialist, a lesbian, a bisexual, straight, an activist, an entertainer,” Near told me.

“I finally started saying, ‘I am willing.’ Willing to listen, to learn, to remain open-minded, to have an opinion, to change my mind, to remain detached, to participate, to partner, to live alone, to not have children, to be a trustworthy friend and a fabulous aunt.”

Near continued, saying “I’m so happy to know that The Women Next Door is singing ‘I Am Willing.’ Choruses add a wall of sound that cannot be achieved by a soloist.”

Ten WND members will take to the stage at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in downtown Vancouver. Donations from other choir members and honoraria from past performances will help to defray the expenses — an estimated \$2,200 per person for travel and lodging.

“Singing brings us together,” Carol Putnam said. “We take responsibility for each other.”

**A previous version of this story incorrectly stated Near was 75. We regret the error.*



Eric Wagner

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This is great. Thanks for sharing the story.

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