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Choral Spotlight - New Author Mentorship

Songs for a New South: How a GALA Chorus Is Reclaiming Its Identity as Both Queer and Southern

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"I didn't know we had GALA Choruses in the South." That sentence was spoken to me during my first visit to the GALA Festival in the summer of 2024. I believe what this festival-goer meant was, "The South doesn't seem like a very hospitable place for a GALA chorus." For Nashville in Harmony, where I serve as Artistic Director, it was our first appearance at the festival in our 20-year history. This was one of many performances that marked our twentieth anniversary, and we arrived proud to represent our home. In Minneapolis, surrounded by thousands of queer musicians, it was clear the general consensus about "the South" came from what they had seen in the news or on social media. Still, their dismay stuck with me for the duration of the festival.

When fellow attendees learned we were from Tennessee, their reactions followed a familiar script. The first questions were never about our music, our mission, or our community. They were about the Drag Ban, the anti-transgender legislation, or whichever new legislative disaster had most recently made national headlines. To many people there, "Tennessee" was shorthand for hostility, exclusion, and political extremism. They weren't wrong. The idea that a queer-affirming chorus not only existed in the South but had been thriving for two decades seemed unfathomable.

It was obvious to us that the story people told about the South was incomplete. Yes, we live in a region of the country where harmful laws are passed that disenfranchise our community, but we also live in a region where queer people build community, create art, enact social change, resist erasure, and claim joy in the face of hostility. Nashville in Harmony isn't an anomaly; we are part of a larger, often overlooked Southern movement of LGBTQ+ resilience. I realized we needed to change that perception—not just about our organization, but about the fullness that is the South. We are not defined solely by the legislation passed in our statehouse. We are defined by the people who stay, who sing, who fight, who build, and who refuse to disappear–and if folks in our own organization don't know that, then we have work to do.

When we returned from our fabulous debut with GALA, I floated the idea of a Call for Scores to my board—a simple proposal with a deeper purpose. I wanted to highlight queer and marginalized voices from the South, voices that are too often dismissed, overlooked, or assumed not to exist. I also wanted to reclaim themes we believe are genuinely Southern values: hospitality, resilience, diversity, storytelling, and a stubborn yet almost religious commitment to hope. These values didn't disappear; the loudest and most harmful political narratives from our region overshadowed them.

Tennessee Representative Justin Jones often says, "The South will rise anew." It's a deliberate reimagining of a phrase with a painful history—one rooted in white supremacy and nostalgia for a past that never should have been romanticized. His reframing struck me. It suggested that the South isn't doomed to repeat its worst chapters. It can be rewritten, reclaimed, and reborn by us: the people fighting for justice, dignity, and belonging. Inspired, I named our initiative Songs for a New South. This initiative sought submissions from Southern composers, prioritizing queer and other marginalized artists, in order to showcase the values we believe should represent our place in the South.

What began as a programming idea quickly became so much more. The process sparked conversations within the choir about what we wish people understood about the South—about the queer Southerners who stay, who build community, who create art, and who refuse to surrender their home to the forces trying to define it without them. Members shared stories of growing up here, leaving and returning, or choosing to stay despite the political climate. We talked about the tension between love of place and frustration with its politics, and how those feelings can coexist without canceling each other out. Those conversations opened the door to something unexpected: healing.

> Our mission at Nashville in Harmony is to use music to build community and create social change. Our Songs for a New South project has been one of the most powerful ways we have worked to bring that mission to life. In a region that has often - and unfortunately justly - been associated with bigotry and intolerance, it was important to us to not only reframe and reclaim true Southern values like community and hospitality, but to do so by elevating the voices of LGBTQ+ composers in that same region and creating a music project where marginalized voices could rise up and be heard to affect change. (J.T. Landry, Marketing Director)

As we explored what it means to be Southern—and what it could mean—we reframed our own histories. We began to see the South not only as a site of struggle but as a place where queer joy, creativity, and resistance have always existed. We began reclaiming traditions, language, and cultural touchstones that had been weaponized against us. In doing so, we softened some of the resentment we carried toward our home.

> The way that the South is portrayed in the media is not necessarily the South I grew up in. It is portrayed as this ruby-red conservative place, and while there is some truth to that, it doesn't tell the full story. I am Southern. Loving with curiosity first or loving with hospitality first is a Southern value. Inclusivity and diversity are Southern values. What I have learned about the community that surrounds me is that my people have always been here. And we're still here. (Rev. Liz DeWeese, Alto 2 Section Leader)

Songs for a New South became more than a call for compositions. It became a call to ourselves: to tell our own story, to honor our roots, and to imagine a South that rises anew—not in the shadow of its past, but in the light of the people—queer people—who are shaping its future. The Call for Scores yielded some fabulous compositions by Southern composers, including David Walters of Georgia, Nicole DiPaulo of Tennessee, Jeremy Smith of Alabama, and Matt Herman of Kentucky. Walters, who placed first in our Call for Scores competition, wrote a beautiful setting of "When I Rise Up," a text by African American poet and Harlem Renaissance playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson. Other works in the collection included an arrangement by our former Artistic Director of Holly Near's "Singing for Our Lives," and two personal compositions - one featured the Harvey Milk quote, "Hope will never be silent"; the other based on words shared by Elliot Page at the 2014 Human Rights Campaign conference (see Appendix A).

We took this concert on the road, carrying our message across state lines and into communities that rarely see themselves reflected in mainstream queer choral spaces. Over the season, we presented four concerts in three Southern states—Tennessee, Alabama, and Kentucky. Each performance felt like a small act of cultural diplomacy. We weren't just singing; we were showing up as living proof that queer Southern artistry is vibrant, present, and unafraid. At each concert, with audiences ranging from 60 to 400 in attendance, we heard testimonies from Southerners who said this is what they want the South to be known for. They wanted the South to be a place for all people of all walks of life. The music made and the conversations had in those communities planted seeds, and in the year since that concert tour, two LGBTQIA+ choirs have sprung up in the communities we visited.

Alongside the tour, we recorded an album that will premiere this summer—a permanent record of the stories, sounds, and reclaimed values that shaped Songs for a New South. It's more than a musical product; it's a

testament to the composers, singers, and communities who trusted us with their voices. It's also a way of saying that, we are here, and we have something to contribute to the national conversation about queer choral music. We did not, however, want this to be a one-time project. We wanted it to become a platform.

That's why we're building a consortium of queer Southern composers on our website—a growing, living archive that highlights the creators who call this region home. Our goal is to replicate this process periodically, offering new opportunities, new collaborations, and new stories that reflect the complexity of Southern queer life. This will be our contribution to the broader choral landscape: a sustained commitment to lifting up voices too often ignored or underestimated.

Through this process, we discovered something essential about ourselves. Touring, recording, commissioning, and curating forced us to articulate who we are and who we want to become. It pushed us to claim our identity not just as a chorus from the South, but as a chorus shaped by the South—its contradictions, its beauty, its tensions, and its relentless capacity for reinvention. In the end, Songs for a New South became more than a concert cycle. It became a musical reintroduction to the South itself: not the South people think they know, but the South we live in, love, challenge, and continue to transform.

Appendix A

Composition List

Title	*Composer*	*Poet*	*Voicing*	*Duration*	*Contact*
We Deserve Love	Wesley King	Elliot Page, Wesley King	SATB divisi	3:47	itswesleyking.com
The Walls	Jason Shelton	Jason Shelton, with poets from the chorus adding their own texts	SAB	10:45 (includes chorister poems between each verse)	jason@portaraensemble.com
Hold Me	Don Schlosser	Donika Deshawn Ross	SATB	4:23	donschlosser610@yahoo.com
When I Rise Up	David Walters	Georgia Douglas Johnson	SATB divisi	5:47	david@dwaltersmusic.com
Singing for Our Lives	Holly Near; arr. Don Schlosser	Holly Near	SATB divisi	3:05	donschlosser610@yahoo.com
Pledge of Peace	Nicole Elyse DiPaolo	Alexander L. Posey	SATB	2:57	ndipaolo.musicaneo.com
I Shall Not Live in Vain	Matthew Herman	Emily Dickenson	SATBB	3:40	wku.edu/music/herman
Carter Family Canticles	Jeremy Smith	The Carter Family	SATB divisi	8:12 (three movements)	jeremysmithcomposer.com
Hope Will Never Be Silent	Wesley King	Harvey Milk	SATB divisi	3:20	itswesleyking.com

Wesley King is the Artistic Director and Conductor of Nashville in Harmony. He was hired during the COVID-19 pandemic and grew the choir, which had dwindled to 43 members, back to 120 members strong. Under his leadership, the organization has grown to also include a 70-member Pride Marching Band and an 80-member SSA chorus. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Vocal/Choral Music Education from The University of Alabama, an MDiv from Lexington Theological Seminary, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Public Administration and Policy from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. He is a published composer and arranger as well as an academic writer.

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