

Hamilton Voices presents



to dwell...

uncovering the homeless experience through song

Sunday, December 5 - Wellin Hall, Schambach Center

Songs from the Streets documentary 6 pm - *Forgotten Voices* performance 7:30 pm

dwell

verb (used without object), dwelt or dwelled, dwelling

to live or stay as a permanent resident; reside.

to live or continue in a given condition or state: *to dwell in happiness.*

to linger over, emphasize, or ponder in thought, speech, or writing (often followed by *on* or *upon*): *to dwell on a particular point in an argument.*

(of a moving tool or machine part) to be motionless for a certain interval during operation.

FORGOTTEN VOICES

Katie Kring, composer

Sunday, December 5, 2021, 7:30pm
Wellin Hall, Schambach Center, Hamilton College

Hamilton Voices
Charlotte Botha, director | Tina Toggia, pianist

**One
Last Night**

**Two
Miles to Go**

**Three
Without the Struggle**

**Four
I am Happy**

**Five
Some Place to Come to**

**Postscript
I See You**

* Please hold your applause until after the Postscript.

** You are invited to complete an “I am...” note and add it to the sharing wall

NOTES FROM THE COMPOSER

To create this piece, I interviewed and solicited texts from my homeless friends (most of whom are members of the Springfield Street Choir) about their lives, experiences, and opinions, and used their words as best I could to assemble the pieces of music you hear here. I have attempted to confine my editorial work to structures as much as possible rearranging thoughts for flow, rhyme, and structure, while preserving the language, meaning, and feeling of the original texts to the greatest extent I could. It is my hope that you hear the beautifully articulated, piercing words in this song cycle, give credit where it is due – to the brilliant, beautiful, exceedingly human people living on the streets of Springfield, and let that move you to generosity, advocacy, and activism around this pressing humanitarian crisis.

Much love to Mike H., Paul S., Katy M., Blake A., Nino A., and others who shared their wisdom and insights with me. Special thanks and love to Coco, who was my first homeless friend, and has provided invaluable guidance in this project, and in my worldview in general; to my parents for their unceasing support and encouragement, to Christie Love who truly lives up to her name, and to SCC Artistic Director Chris Brammer, for being a terrific collaborator and providing endless insight and support for all of my crazy schemes.

One: Last Night

The shelters weren't open last night and it was so cold,
I was afraid to go to sleep because I didn't think I would wake up. What is the word for wanting to
go home and having no home?

The text of this piece is the verbatim Facebook status of my dear friend Coco after a long, cold night in February of 2020. At the time they posted this, they were homeless and sleeping in an unheated van. In Springfield, MO, the current guidelines set by the Continuum of Care only open the shelters when the temperature is forecast to be 32 degrees or less for four or more overnight hours, without any consideration for windchill or precipitation. Medical science tells us hypothermia can begin to set in at temperatures below 40 degrees for people who are not dressed for the weather, and at even higher temperatures when people are wet. Thus, it is in fact entirely possible to freeze to death on nights that are too warm for the emergency cold weather shelters to open. The musical setting attempts to capture the haunting fear, the crystalline, malicious cold, and the anger and despair of having nowhere to go home.

Have you ever slept rough – outside, without any shelter – because you had no other option?

What would you need to survive the night?

Two: Miles to Go

Every single movie's ending
faded to the black
Whether it's a
Coronary violence
(a massive heart attack)
Or it's a flyer from the fire
of an automatic Mack
You get a go and then it's over
And you never coming back.

Every single life is ending
Pretty much the same
As just a struggle for the money
Or the love
Or for the fame
And it's a fight like every night
For all the hungry sick and lame
And then you die a year goes by
And no one even knows your name

Every single planet's just a
small exploding rock
On ours, the lives of all the greatest men
Like Roosevelt and Bach
Are interlocking with the beggars
And the traders of the stock
Still the universe surrounding them
Is winding down the clock

For every single friend of mine
I've ever had to lose is still a
ghost that I am carrying
inside my tennis shoes.

The nihilist is wandering past the woods,
so lovely dark and deep
'Cuz for them
I still have miles to go
Before I sleep.

I asked my friend Coco, who I knew to be a brilliant writer, to write a lyric for this project, and within about an hour, they'd sent me this expertly-crafted text. From the exquisite rhyming, driving scansion, and poetic references, you can clearly see their brilliance, anger, resignation, and resilience. For Coco, and many of my other homeless friends, their lives are marked with the relentless grief of losing people they love to overdose, exposure, violence, and despair, and this text beautifully captures the experience of slogging forward with those ghosts.

Our homeless community walks upwards of 10 miles a day, from meal to meal, camp to shelter, and from one place they're not welcome to another. When the lockdowns happened at the beginning of the pandemic and all the shelters and libraries and fast food dining rooms closed, our homeless community literally had no other legal place to be except trudging endlessly along the sidewalk, as their feet bled and their shoes disintegrated. Thus, I chose to set the text using a blues worksong because the experience of homelessness is a relentless, involuntary, dehumanizing, and often fatal form of oppression that is well represented by a musical tradition that was developed by enslaved Black people, and was continued into the 20th century by hard-labor prison chaingangs. The driving foot stomps are characteristic of this genre, and are also reminiscent of the endless walking of our homeless community.

Why are our cities designed to keep the most vulnerable from resting?

Three: Without the Struggle

Without the struggle I ain't me
On the streets, it's alright, it's where I belong
If everything is running smooth
then it's too good
I walk as humble as I can

If it ain't sweat, blood and tears
then it ain't worth living
I am flesh, so I'm gonna feed the flesh
And if I can feed the spirit,
well, it needs fed too
I am gonna do me while I can

And oh, there's smiles out there
And oh, when you get those smiles

God it's good, you know? God it's good.
But the rest of it is hard So I live hard

Without the struggle, I ain't me
On the streets, it's alright, it's where I belong
A person comes in all shapes and forms
I should come in small doses
But I don't

Without the struggle I ain't me
On the streets, it's alright, it's where I belong
If everything is running smooth
then it's too good
I walk as humble as I can

This text is based on an interview I did with my friend Paul on a cold February night as we stood outside the Connecting Grounds church, surrounded by crowds of other homeless people, ducking into the church for warmth, then back out to smoke, rinse, and repeat. At the time of this interview, Paul had been out on the street for about 8 years, and was on any number of drugs. Just about a month after this interview, he got sober, and has maintained that sobriety to this day. He is also off the street now, living with his mother.

Paul is someone who is a welter of contradictions – a spectacularly articulate man who isn't afraid to throw a punch, someone who loves very deeply but who has been hurt in impossible ways, and who has a rap sheet that says he carries the potential for danger, but who has only ever made me feel safe and protected to have him around. Knowing how much he has struggled, I am so proud of the progress he has made.

Four: I am Happy

I am grateful, I am learning, I'm a child of God
I am kind and I'm outgoing I'm a child of God
I am strong and I'm brave
I'm a survivor
I'm a good person
I'm a member of the choir
And I am happy
A child of God
Happy

I am awesome and I'm blessed, I'm a child of God
I am confident and capable, a child of God
I am alive
I am a warrior
I am forgiven
I am beautiful
And I am happy
A child of God
Happy

This song was very much a surprise to me. After a Street Choir rehearsal in December of 2019, I asked all our singers to turn over their attendance slips and write “I am...” and then finish the sentence however they liked. I gave them no prompts or coaching, encouraged them to write whatever they wanted, didn’t explain why I was asking, nothing that would bias the responses. And when I looked through the papers, I have to confess, I was shocked. Winter is a hard time to be homeless, tempers are short, everyone’s tired and cranky. And I really expected a lot of answers along the lines of “I am forgotten” or something like that. I got one: “I am sad and depressed.” Instead, they were overwhelmingly positive. (There were also a few that were hilarious, like “I am Ralph”... from a guy named Mike.)

I do not wish for anyone to overgeneralize from this song that homelessness is a bucket of laughs. It is not. It is crushingly traumatic in every aspect. But the awful baseline of day to day homeless life renders good experiences borderline-euphoric. And far be it for me to censor their honest responses because they were too positive for my agenda. I asked, they answered. After all, our friends had just done one of their very favorite things – singing in the choir, in a place where they felt safe and loved. Thus, they indeed told the truth. In that moment, they were happy.

Five: Some Place to Come to

I lived a rough life my whole life
Slept in a cardboard box full of broken
dreams
Seeking safety and finding danger
Trying to meet some basic needs

This claustrophobic crowd
We’re like micro-nomads
The same tribe of people
Walking from place to place
With people who don’t feel like my people
Thrust together in poverty and space

But this is a place to come and feed the spirit
A home away from homeless
Where we know they love and see us
A place where we can be us

We’re wearing wet socks all day long
Walking miles and miles till our feet bleed
Nowhere to lie down, nowhere to heal
Nowhere to sit or sleep or breathe

And some of it is not as bad as people think
And some of it is way worse
And I’m dancing just as fast as I can
And somehow I’m going in reverse

But here
It gives you a peace, a sanctuary
Some place to come to
This door’s always been open
Some place to come to
Some place to come home to
Home.

This is a very bittersweet song about a special place that is gone now. The Connecting Grounds was the church where the Street Choir rehearsed from Day One until the pandemic halted our rehearsals in March of 2020. It was a church, yes, but it was also a shelter, a cafeteria, a meeting place, a grocery store, a clothing boutique, a bike-repair shop, a field hospital, a foster-visit center, and whatever else

it needed to be, all in three bays of a strip mall up against the railroad tracks, in an impoverished part of town. It was all that, but it was so much more than that.

Every person I interviewed for this project – the ones quoted here, and the ones not – used words like “sanctuary” and “home.” “They love us,” they said, over and over and over. And they did – they do – love the homeless and marginalized so well that the neighbors complained. The neighborhood organized. And this little church was told that they either had to stop serving their beloved homeless friends, or they had to leave. So they did, and have created a wonderful constellation of outreach services and others elsewhere in the city that quite literally have kept our homeless population alive. And yet, the thing that is missing is the place for everyone to be together under the banner of love. A place for everyone to come to – home.

Where have you felt most loved, understood, and seen?

What would you do if you lost access to that place?

Postscript: I See You

I see you
through swish and flick
of windshield wipers
cardboard-sign bearing
stoplight waiting
rain-dripping chin

I carry no cash

I desire to make eye contact
but feel embarrassed for comforts
I take for granted daily, hourly

Reliable transportation
hot showers, good food
supportive family

I see you through
side-eye glances, waiting
on an overdue green

Dare I open doors
offer to take you to lunch
warm, dry respite on a
cat-and-dog-hair-covered couch

Is that wise, is that safe
What about my kids?

Simple, naïve honest prayers
do they honor God and neighbor
or just assuage guilt?

I'm sorry I don't say anything
I'm sorry I don't give anything

But I see you
beautifully human
and hope you know
you are loved.

The poem “Victory,” by Springfield poet Ethan D. Bryan serves as the postscript to the Forgotten Voices cycle, turning the viewpoint from that of the unhoused to that of housed people who sincerely wish to help, but feel powerless and confused in the face of suffering. I love this poem because it correctly identifies the first step to real change – loving the beautifully human people who make up our unsheltered community. It does not absolve any of us from helping in every way we can, but it understands that love comes first, and then action follows. I hope this moves you to carry some cash, some handwarmers, water, food, something, so that you can always be ready to act in love and kindness towards those you meet, that it moves you to advocate for real change.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Katie Kring is a composer, writer-of-musicals, baker and alto. Katie’s choral works and commissions are performed internationally and she has served as Springfield Chamber Chorus’s Composer-in-Residence for several years. Her “At the Hour of Closing” was the winner of the 2019 MCDA Opus Award. She is particularly interested in creating work that empowers disadvantaged communities and is a passionate advocate for writing good parts for altos. Katie’s musical theatre works include PEARL, ONWARD, FARMERS MARKET THE MUSICAL (about the time she got kicked out of the farmers’ market – twice!), IN THE SWIM and THINK BIG for the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and KELLY THE DESTROYER VS THE SPRINGFIELD COBRAS. Her first opera, SWEET LOUISA, is slated to premiere in 2022. Katie is the owner of Pickwick & Cherry, a bakery & cooking school, and an adjunct professor in the Missouri State University Music Department. In 2019, she founded the Springfield Street Choir, a choir made up of people experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty. She received her MFA in Musical Theatre Writing at NYU and her BFA in music at the University of Michigan, where she danced 25’ up a tree and lived to tell about it.

Coco is a survivor of mental illness, domestic violence, addiction, and over a decade of collective homeless experience. They have ridden the rails, slept in vans, tents, and trap houses, overcame addiction, been locked up for petty poverty crimes, and parented some terrific children. Throughout, they have remained a loving parent, a brilliant writer and communicator, and a fierce advocate for justice for those experiencing poverty and marginalization.

Ethan D. Bryan is a storyteller whose narratives explore what it means to live a good story. At the age of six, he lost all of his hair due to an immune-system disorder called alopecia. Ethan knows about overcoming personal obstacles and being bullied. He also understands the power of hope, persevering through hundreds upon hundreds of manuscript rejections. The author of ten books, his writings earned him an opportunity to speak at the National Baseball Hall of Fame, an invitation to the White House for the Royals World Series championship, and endorsements from several former MLB players including Jim “The Rookie” Morris. Ethan has appeared ever so briefly in an ESPN 30-for-30 and as a background ballplayer in an Emmy-award winning documentary (First Boys of Spring). Ethan played catch every single day of 2018, an effort that came to be known as Catch 365 and documented the journey through a daily blog.

The Springfield Street Choir is a choir for people in Springfield, Missouri who are experiencing homelessness and/or extreme poverty and deprivation. It began in October of 2019 at the erstwhile

Connecting Grounds church with just 16 singers, and by the time it was forced to shut down because of the pandemic, had had over 300 homeless singers attend at least one rehearsal, performed for hundreds of people at the Springfield Art Museum and on The Mystery Hour, and been the subject of an award-winning feature-length documentary “Songs from the Streets.” After a not-a-particularly-successful attempt at COVID-era choir in a parking garage in late 2020, the Street Choir returned to regular rehearsals in April of 2021 and will be resuming performances soon. Many of the texts in this piece were taken from conversations with its members.

Hamilton Voices is a choral theatre ensemble of students from Hamilton College. Under the direction of **Charlotte Botha** and collaborative pianist **Tina Toggia**, the group seeks to respond to, create awareness of, or engage with current issues through interdisciplinary and multi-media artistic expression.

Student performers

Shelly Cao
Kaylee Davis (soloist)
Eva Millay Evans
Jeremy Gordon
Ryan Hayes
John Hern
Helen Higgins
Matt Jankowski
James Kaeser
David Li
Maggie Marks
Benn Otten
Kate Peinkofer
Alyssa Samuels
Olivia Seymour
Katherine Shock
Anna Skrobala
Hunter Wisneski
Cynthia Yang

Our special thanks to Bill Di Paolo, Michelle Reiser-Memmer, and Hannah Petersen
for their assistance behind the scenes

To support or learn more about the Springfield Street Choir and Katie Kring, please visit
theconnectinggrounds.com

We are grateful that you have chosen to share in this project with us and welcome donations of
coats, socks, and other winter wear in the lobby.