

THE KINGDOM CHOIR 2019

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS





THE KINGDOM CHOIR ROYAL WEDDING SINGERS HIT NEW HIGH

They captured hearts with their performance at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (above) and now The Kingdom Choir (above right) are preparing to win over the charts.

The gospel group from London have signed a record deal with Sony and begin recording their debut album next month, for release in November.



Their rendition of Ben E King's *Stand By Me* in St George's Chapel was a spellbinding moment of the May service and has been viewed on YouTube eight million times. The choir's biggest audience before the royal wedding was just 200 people.

"It's been a rollercoaster, but we wouldn't have it any other way," says conductor Karen Gibson. "First,

the honour of singing at the royal wedding, and then the thrill of being signed to Sony."

The album will feature original songs and covers, including *Stand By Me*. Sharing her memories with **HELLO!** after the big day in Windsor, Karen said: "When Meghan was walking out she looked over and I think she nodded a thank-you."

'It brings joy': UK's godmother of gospel on how her choir stole the royal wedding

The Kingdom Choir's Windsor rendition of *Stand By Me* has shot Karen Gibson to fame. She tells *James Tapper* how the passionate music has spread far beyond its church roots

Gospel is spreading, and we can praise Karen Gibson for that. The silver-coiffed conductor of the Kingdom Choir came close to stealing the show at the royal wedding last week, with a stripped-back, tear-inducing performance of *Stand By Me*.

The choir pulled off the impossible feat of following Bishop Michael Curry's fanfare of a sermon, with Gibson controlling her own and the singers' passions to bring calmness before the wedding vows.

"We didn't know Michael Curry was going to be there," she said. "He wasn't at the runthrough. But my back is to him and I hear this voice, and I'm watching the choir getting all excited because his style of preaching is exactly what we're used to – but we're actually in St George's Chapel, listening to a black gospel preacher. We want to say 'hallelujah' and 'amen' but of course we can't, we just have to hold ourselves in."

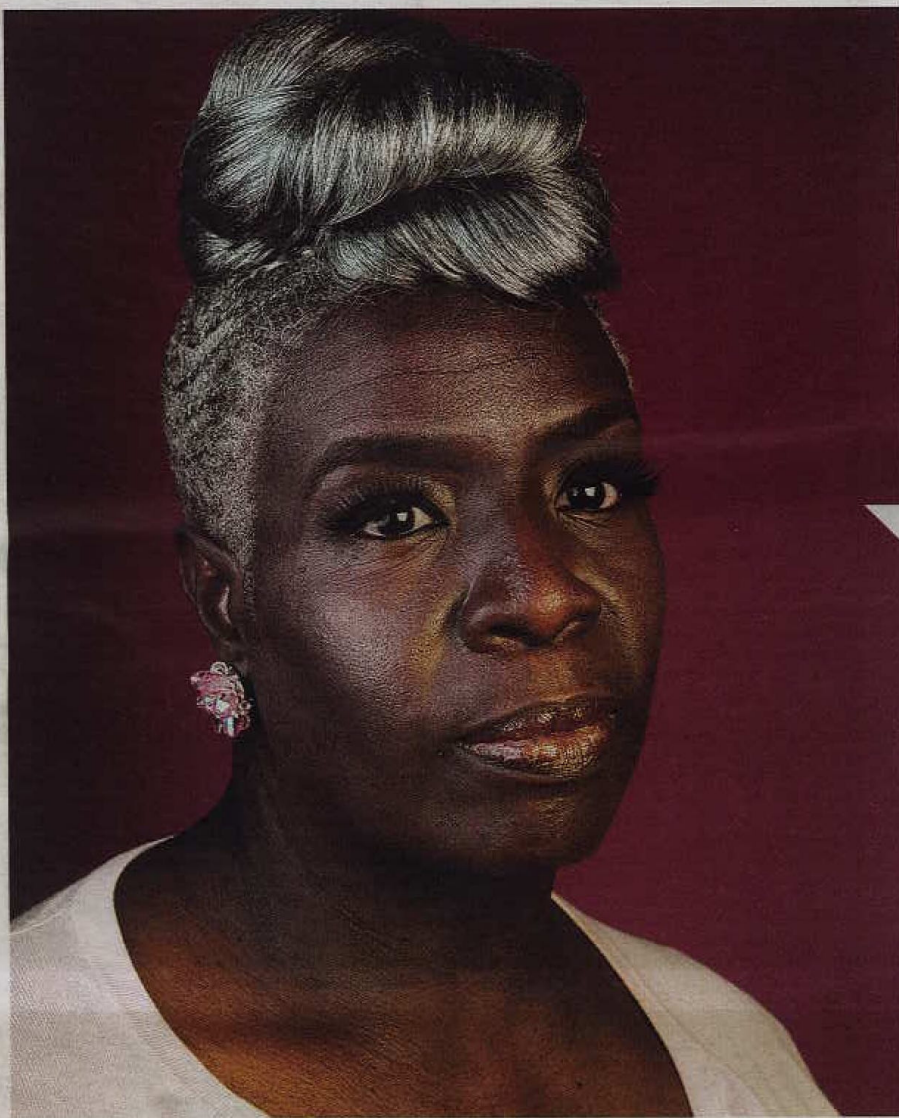
Since the wedding, Gibson and her London-based choir have been in the eye of a whirlwind, performing for TV in the US and around the world, and dealing with a deluge of interest on social media and beyond. *Stand By Me* has been streamed more than 100,000 times on Spotify and watched on YouTube more than 10 million times. The choir's website has crashed twice. There is talk of a collaboration with Sheku Kanneh-Mason, the cellist who played while the Duke and Duchess of Sussex signed the register, and on Friday the choir filmed with the BBC drama *Call The Midwife*. People have even painted fan art of her – and more.

"They did a Bad Lip Reading of us," she said, pulling out a phone to show a parody video of the wedding. "If you make it on to that, then you've made it."

The attention is also offline. "People get so excited when they know it's me," she said. "They hug me in the street. People scream through the car window. People saying how it made them cry. I didn't think that people would be so engaged with the song but people have thanked us over and over again."

That overnight success has been 22 years in the making. After 11 years in IT, Gibson was made redundant and fell into teaching at a south London school. Eight years later, in 1996, she moved into music fulltime.

One of those who encountered Gibson in her early years was Gareth



Choral conductor Karen Gibson in south London on Friday. Portrait by Richard Saker for the Observer

'A strictly gospel style would be more florid – they wanted it really stripped back'

Karen Gibson, leader of the Kingdom Choir

"They seemed really in love. They were really into each other. And spoke as one."

Prince Charles had suggested a gospel choir, she said, but *Stand By Me* had to be exactly right, so she asked Mark De-Lisser, a former Kingdom Choir singer who has worked with Adele and Jessie J, to do the arrangement. "They wanted it done in a very specific way. We got lots of instruction about how it should be performed. They sent us a couple of links, a Tracy Chapman version. If we were to do it in a strictly gospel style, it would be a lot more florid – they wanted it really stripped back." That complemented the relative simplicity of the couple's other decisions, she said: the duchess's "demure, simple" dress and her subtle makeup. "I think they had a very clear idea of how they wanted the service to go. If we did a full-on gospel number it wouldn't have worked so well."

Gospel really is spreading. Malone said he has had no trouble finding gospel choirs for his tour, "even in places you wouldn't expect, like Preston or Newcastle", and Gibson agrees – one of her community choirs, Gospel on the Rise, performed last night in London and she was out delivering leaflets on Friday.

"It's not mainstream, but you have so many community gospel choirs up and down the country. They're blowing up, absolutely blowing up," she said. "I've taught Buddhists, I've taught Muslims, I've taught witches, and they have absolutely loved it."

"Whether you're a Christian or not, it does something for your spirit. I believe that when you're singing, the sound comes out and the words go in and if they're words of joy then they're going to cause joy. It's not scientifically tested but I keep seeing the same thing."



The Kingdom Choir, left, sang *Stand By Me* last Saturday during the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, below.

Malone, TV's *Mr Choir*, before either had been on TV, when he saw her teaching schoolgirls. "She just went 'Right!', and she started, full tilt, gospel," he said. "In the time it took me to pack up my bag, she had got them all singing this piece she was teaching them and it was amazing."

Since then the Kingdom Choir

has performed at the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002, with the Spice Girls and Elton John, for Bill Clinton and Desmond Tutu and with Joan Armatrading as a surprise for Nelson Mandela when he spoke at the London School of Economics.

None was as momentous as the wedding of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, Gibson said. "It's because we were invited to a private ceremony, even though it's televised and millions of people were watching. It's a very special thing, a wedding – it's an honour, because there are vows being performed, a union, a coming together."

She got the call when she was on a bus in Battersea two months ago, and a few days later they were at Kensington Palace to meet the couple. "We did a little sing-song for them," Gibson said.





EXCLUSIVE PHOTOS AND INTERVIEW
THE KINGDOM CHOIR
ON ACHIEVING HARMONY WITH
HARRY AND MEGHAN FOR THEIR
ROYAL WEDDING PERFORMANCE



'We didn't just turn up and sing. Harry and Meghan were very involved. They knew exactly what they wanted'



Karen Gibson (on right), leader and founder of The Kingdom Choir, poses for HELLO!'s exclusive photoshoot with choir members (from left) Collette Watson-Blythe, Elaine Simpson, Stacey Skeete and Clinton Jordan. Since performing *Stand By Me* at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (top, far left), they have been living the dream

(FROM LEFT) COLLETTE'S DRESS: PARADOX LONDON. ELAINE'S TOP & SKIRT: RAISHMA. STACEY'S TOP & SKIRT: CH CHL. BOOTS: NEW LOOK. CLINTON'S WAISTCOAT & TROUSERS: BURTON. SHIRT & SHOES: MAYA DELUXE



The new Duke and Duchess leave St George's Chapel, Windsor (above) after the wedding service. The gospel choir, pictured outside the chapel beforehand (below) were the last people to enter. The couple had asked them to change the arrangement of the famous Ben E King song 11 times, but since their performance – watched by tens of millions – they have secured a major record deal and found fame across the world



'You could see how in love they were from the way they look at - and listen to - each other'

They were one of the standout musical moments of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's wedding and that spectacular royal seal of approval has propelled The Kingdom Choir into international superstardom.

With a major record deal, a first album coming, the likes of Oprah Winfrey queuing up to have them on their top-rated US shows, as well as being personally invited by Prince Harry to close next month's Invictus Games, the gospel choir has been well and truly put on the map – and all thanks to their goosebump-inducing rendition of Ben E King's 1960 classic *Stand By Me*.

But the choir's founder and leader Karen Gibson has exclusively revealed that Prince Harry and Meghan asked them to change the arrangement of their performance an incredible 11 times before the couple felt they had it "absolutely right" for their big day.

"We didn't just turn up and sing," she smiles. "Harry and Meghan were very involved because they knew exactly how they wanted that song performed. It was a fascinating journey for all of us and we were so happy the end result had such an impact on everyone."

HELLO! can reveal that changes were being made to the super-stripped-back arrangement up to the last minute, which meant the bride and groom only heard the perfect version as they stood in St George's Chapel, Windsor, minutes after taking their marriage vows.

REWORKING A CLASSIC

The London-based choir, which has been going for two decades, was initially contacted two months before the wedding by an aide of the Prince of Wales, who felt that a gospel choir would add to the sense of diversity and inclusivity on the big day. Music teacher Karen, 54, whose choir has performed at the Royal Albert Hall, St Paul's Cathedral and the Millennium Dome, tells us: "We were incredibly flattered to be asked to perform at the wedding and I don't think any of us guessed what sort of an impact it would have on our lives."

"We were asked to sing *Stand By Me*, so we put down an arrangement that was pure gospel – it was a very full-on sound, which we are used to singing. Gospel music is all about the cherries on top and it's not about stinting on anything. But we got word back that they wanted something a little less, so we did a second version that had an Etta James arrangement, but again we had word back that it wasn't right."

Karen – who has appeared as a judge on Gareth Malone's *The Choir* – explains that the initial



'They hadn't heard the song because the 11th version needed tweaking'

Elaine (above) says of the chapel: "You could feel the love flooding through," while Karen (right) admits she wasn't sure the final version of the song was what the couple wanted

communication was via email. The royal couple would listen to their arrangement and give notes to an aide who would then contact Karen.

The South-London-born musician says: "I was getting emails saying 'less beats' and 'stripped back', but it's very hard to talk music in black-and-white words on an email. It's something you have to hear and feel and listen to. In the end we were asked to go to meet them to talk and sing things through."

It was arranged that Karen and a small group – including her sister Kim Samuels, childhood friends Elaine Simpson and Collette Watson-Blythe, who have both been part of the choir since its formation, along with fellow original member Paul Lee – would go to Kensington Palace for an informal private session with Prince Harry and

Meghan. The couple asked them to listen to a Tracy Chapman version of the song before they arrived.

"We went to Kensington Palace and had tea, biscuits and a chat," Karen said. "You could see how very much in love they were just from the way they look at each other and listen to what each other says. We went into a few new arrangements and heard what they had to say. Paul took the lead on the song though we planned to use a different singer on the day. We thought we'd done a very simple version but they wanted it even more simple, so we were back to the drawing board."

In total, Karen and the choir made 11 versions that the couple loved but still wanted stripping back. They also requested that Paul, who works in church administration, take



Speaking for all her choir members, Karen (below, chatting to the Prince of Wales at a royal garden party) tells us: "All we want is to spread the spirit of joy"



Wedding guests and fans of the choir Oprah (left) and Tom Hardy (below with wife Charlotte Riley)



'It felt beautiful in the chapel. We hoped they loved the song. Meghan mouthed: "Thank you"' Elaine

the lead on the day. "The day of the wedding, I knew they were going to hear the 12th version, which was our most stripped back yet," says Karen. "They hadn't had time to hear it because the 11th version needed tweaking, so this was it. They'd obviously loved Paul's voice so they wanted to hear him on the day."

"While we weren't nervous about performing, I was nervous as to whether this would be exactly what they wanted. It felt incredible on the day. We were the last people to go into the chapel before Harry and Meghan – we watched all the guests go through, then we took our places. When we sang, I had my back to them so I couldn't see any reaction. All I was focusing on was my choir, the music and the message of the music. I didn't think about anything apart from hoping they loved it."

Soprano Elaine says: "It felt beautiful in that chapel. You could feel the love flooding through that stunning old building. We all hoped they loved it and then when they walked back down the aisle Meghan mouthed: 'Thank you,' and Prince Charles leant in towards us sopranos and said: 'That was amazing.' That felt wonderful. But the whole experience was so completely special. I think it was surreal for everyone."

Collette remembers Joss Stone giving them the thumbs-up. Karen adds: "Outside, Tom Hardy gave me a huge hug and said he'd been so moved by our singing. That was a nice moment. Tom Hardy's a very fine guy."

"It was my absolute pleasure to have been

a participant in the wedding music for the royal couple," Paul says. "Meeting them was truly special and it was an honour to be chosen to sing the main vocal part."

SURPASSING EXPECTATIONS

Since the wedding, the choir have received a personal thank-you note from the couple expressing their deep gratitude and thanking the choir for "surpassing our expectations" as well as their "efforts and commitment to perfecting" the bridal arrangement of *Stand By Me*.

The choir's album – also called *Stand By Me* – includes tracks such as *Say a Little Prayer*, *Amazing Grace* and *You're the Voice*. And it features an arrangement of Harry's favourite grime artist Stormzy's song *Blinded By Your Grace*, which was the song the Archbishop of Canterbury said he listened to to help quell his nerves before officiating at the wedding.

Karen says: "We'll definitely be sending a copy of the album to Prince Harry and Meghan. Our arrangement of *Stand By Me* is not exactly like the one we did at the wedding. It's still very stripped back, Paul still takes the lead but we've added half a cherry on top in terms of a gospel arrangement. We just hope everyone loves our music. All we want is to spread the spirit of joy." **H**

INTERVIEW: LOUISE GANNON
PHOTOS: DAVID VENNI

STYLING: GAYLE RINKOFF
HAIR & MAKE-UP: EMMA ROZENBROEK AT CREATIVES AGENCY USING BOBBI BROWN & FUDGE; JESSICA KORDECKI AT CREATIVES AGENCY USING MAC COSMETICS & WELLA

The album *Stand By Me* will be released by Sony Music on 26 October. To hear an exclusive first preview of The Kingdom Choir's song *Golden*, visit hellomagazine.com.

THE KINGDOM CHOIR TIMELINE

1994

THE KINGDOM CHOIR IS ESTABLISHED.



1997

THE KINGDOM CHOIR PERFORM WITH SIR ELTON JOHN ON 'AN EVENING WITH ELTON JOHN'.



2000

THE KINGDOM CHOIR WINS ITS FIRST AWARD - BBC RADIO 2 MINSTRELS IN THE GALLERY CHORAL COMPETITION.

2002

KAREN IS HONOURED TO CONDUCT A MASS CHOIR OF OVER 200 PEOPLE IN CELEBRATION OF THE QUEEN'S GOLDEN JUBILEE.



2004

THE KINGDOM CHOIR RELEASE THEIR FIRST ALBUM 'SMILE' ITS A BRAND NEW DAY.



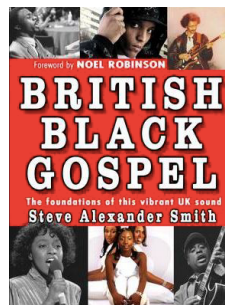
2005

THE KINGDOM CHOIR SURPRISE NELSON MANDELA DURING HIS VISIT TO LONDON BY PERFORMING A SPECIAL SONG (PENNEED BY JOAN ARMATRADING) FOR HIS 87TH BIRTHDAY.



2009

KAREN IS LAUDED AS ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF THE SOUND OF GOSPEL MUSIC IN THE UK IN STEVE ALEXANDER'S 'BLACK BRITISH GOSPEL' THE FIRST BOOK WRITTEN ON BLACK GOSPEL IN THE UK.



2010

KAREN CONDUCTS THE CONGREGATION AT THE BIG ASSEMBLY BEFORE POPE BENEDICT XVI.



2015

KAREN GUESTS AS A GOSPEL SPECIALIST ON GARETH MALONE'S THE CHOIR: 'SING WHILE YOU WORK'.



2016

KAREN CONDUCTS THE SUPER CHOIR AT THE GOSPEL PROMS AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL.

2018

THE KINGDOM CHOIR PERFORM STAND BY ME AT THE ROYAL WEDDING OF HARRY AND MEGHAN.



THE KINGDOM CHOIR PERFORM ON JONATHAN ROSS.



THE KINGDOM CHOIR FEATURE IN BA ADVERT, CELEBRATING THEIR 100TH BIRTHDAY.



THE KINGDOM CHOIR SING AT THE INVICTUS GAMES.



2019

THE KINGDOM CHOIR WILL TOUR THE UK, AUSTRALIA AND AMERICA, THEY WILL APPEAR AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE AND HOLLYWOOD BOWL.

EASTER

KAREN GIBSON WILL PRESENT THE TWO PART SERIES FOR BBC ONE - BRITAINS EASTER STORY ALONGSIDE GARETH MALONE.

CHRISTMAS

THE KINGDOM CHOIR WILL APPEAR ON THE BBC4 'LUCY WORSLEY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL'S'.

Arts & Culture

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'Gospel is England's best kept secret'

MUSIC

Her choir's version of *Stand By Me* was a hit at the last royal wedding. It still hasn't sunk in, Karen Gibson tells *Claire Allfree*

KAREN Gibson will never forget where she was when she took the call. "I was on the number 87 bus," she says, with a twinkle that suggests she has told this story many times before. "A woman said: 'We'd like to invite you to sing at the royal wedding'. I said: 'You're joking, right?' There was a silence. I said: 'Oh, you're not joking at all'. So that was a mad moment."

Two months later Gibson conducted a performance of *Stand By Me* by The Kingdom Choir during the marriage ceremony of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle — which in three heart-stilling minutes bewitched the soul of the nation.

A global audience of two billion had tuned in to watch the wedding: by the end of that day the choir's website had crashed.

Even immediately after the ceremony Gibson knew they had created something special: when they left St George's Chapel to go to the media room they were mobbed by crowds. "We needed bodyguards!" Gibson marvels. "To be honest, I still haven't processed what happened."

What's happened is that a gospel choir

that grew out of an informal music group which Gibson, her sister Kimmie and school friends Elaine and Collette started as teenagers in Tooting in 1994 has become a phenomenon.

Next May The Kingdom Choir embark on a UK tour. On October 27 they will perform at the closing ceremony of the Invictus Games. Tonight they are singing at a ceremony to mark the publication of the Evening Standard's Progress 1000, a list of London's most influential people. And in two weeks they release their first album — a gospel covers record which Gibson describes as "15 songs of love, hope and inspiration", and which includes rousing versions of Coldplay's *Fix You*, Beyoncé's *Halo* and, of course, *Stand By Me*.

Not only that but Gibson, 55, got to take her mother to Buckingham Palace. "We were very kindly invited to one of the Queen's garden parties a few days after the wedding," she says. "Mum loves the royals. She got to meet Prince Charles. She couldn't believe it."

Gibson is sitting in a draughty church hall in Fimlinc where members of the choir are slowly drifting in through the door ahead of the evening's rehearsal. She's regal in bearing but humble in



On song: Karen Gibson's The Kingdom Choir have performed for many celebrities, such as Bill Clinton and Desmond Tutu

person, describing meeting Prince Harry and Meghan Markle before the wedding as like "walking into a magazine. But they were lovely, down to earth, friendly. And they were clearly very much in love — they had that invisible thing you see going on between couples."

Nonetheless, it took Gibson and the choir two months to produce a version of *Stand By Me* that satisfied them. The

pair wanted something simple which, admits Gibson with a laugh, is not the style of The Kingdom Choir. "Gospel is a big, flashy sound, it's bells and whistles," she says. "I had to learn quickly to get off my high horse."

She produced version after version, each one more stripped back than the last, and 11 times it came back with a no. "The version everyone heard was the 12th version, and even now I don't know

if it was exactly what they wanted since we had simply run out of time," she says. "At the time I didn't understand why they kept saying no but of course they were right. The version they got was pure. And it absolutely suited the style of the wedding."

Gibson set up The Kingdom Choir in after being made redundant from an

Continued on Page 36



The Kingdom Choir outside St George's Chapel and (left) Prince Harry and Meghan leave as man and wife



WE GOT THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Their spine-tingling performance at Harry and Meghan's wedding has turned The Kingdom Choir into instant celebrities. Here they give Richard Barber the inside story on the big day

There's no missing Karen Gibson. With her rumbling laugh and plaited silver hair piled high on her head, she's never mistaken for anyone else. Nonetheless, she used to be able to go about her business in public pretty much as she pleased.

All that changed, though, on a sunny day in May when Prince Harry married the then Meghan Markle at St George's Chapel, Windsor, and an estimated two billion people around the world witnessed Karen, 55, conducting The Kingdom Choir with their spine-tingling rendition of Ben E King's hit, Stand By Me.

'If I'd been sitting here six months ago,' she says now, tucked into a corner of a café in Clapham, 'I could never have dreamt of all the things that have happened in so short a space of time. And it's a blessing, although not without its challenges.'

Most television viewers made the easy assumption that, like the charismatic preacher Rev Michael Curry, the choir hailed from America's Deep South. In reality, they hail deep from

the heart of south London. It was Karen who formed the choir in the mid-1990s when she was still working, unhappily, in IT. Five years later, she was made redundant but was able to follow her passion full-time.

'I belong to a Pentecostal church called The God of Prophecy with its own District Choir in London. I was called in to help with various choirs around the capital's churches, aug-

menting them where necessary with members from the District Choir. Then, one day, one of these choirs was invited to sing on the BBC's Songs Of Praise in celebration of their 35th birthday. I had to find a name for them overnight. It came to me in a dream: The Kingdom Choir.'

Membership grew and the choir now boasts 32 singers at full strength. Down the years, they've performed

not only at weddings but also at more high-profile events like a VE Day concert and at the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2002.

Then came the day in March when Karen was standing in her kitchen, minding her own business, and the telephone rang. The caller was an old friend who had connections with Prince Charles's household. 'She told me to prepare myself for a very

important invitation. I thanked her and didn't give it another thought until I was on the top deck of a bus a few days later and my mobile rang.'

The caller was Eva Williams, Deputy Communications Secretary to the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall. Would The Kingdom Choir like to sing at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle? 'My initial reaction was to ask if she was joking. My question was met with silence. So I said, "You're not joking, are you?"' It's thought that Prince Charles, a fan of gospel music, recommended the choir to his son and future daughter-in-law.

Karen had a visit to St George's Chapel to check out the acoustics

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

NEW ERA Barack Obama was elected President of the United States ten years ago this week, beating John McCain



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before lining up her choristers for the big day without being able to tell them why. 'I just asked them to keep 19 May free and I left it to them to work out what was going on. But two weeks later, I was told I could announce it to the choir as long as they told no one.'

Karen and six of her choristers were then invited to Kensington Palace to meet Harry and Meghan and to discuss the arrangement of Stand By Me. 'They were lovely: relaxed and friendly and obviously very much in love. The thing that struck me most was how normal they seemed. We were there for about an hour, chatting over tea and biscuits. And we sang a little for them.'

The royal couple liked what they heard. 'But, when we sent them a CD of our finished arrangement, they thought it was too much, too elaborate. Not the stripped-back sound they were looking for.' There followed much to-ing and fro-ing between them all.

Indeed, it wasn't until the tenth version of the song that Harry and Meghan declared themselves happy with the arrangement. 'It was quite a long way from our gospel roots but it's what they wanted. And they were right: it was in keeping with the rest of the service.'

Ask Karen to choose one word to describe the day itself and she doesn't hesitate. 'Magical,' she says, 'although I wasn't nervous. We were all ready. We knew what we were doing. I've watched it many times since and I honestly thought we gave the best that

Above: singing at the service in St George's Chapel

Right: Prince Charles chats with Karen at a garden party at Buckingham Palace a month after the royal wedding



we could.' And the royal couple obviously liked it. 'They sent us a letter thanking us for contributing so beautifully,' they said, to their special day.'

Then the world went nuts. 'It started the moment we left the chapel. Nobody gave us a second look when we walked in to St George's. Now, everyone was clamouring for autographs and selfies. We had to be escorted by bodyguards,

for heaven's sake. By the end of the day, our website had crashed.'

It didn't stop there. Top British talent manager Jonathan Shalit secured a record deal with Sony. Stand By Me, the album, was

released at the end of October, just as the choir were returning from Sydney having performed at the closing ceremony of Prince Harry's Invictus Games for injured ex-servicemen and women. Next up, the choir will perform on Strictly Come Dancing tomorrow. They will also star in Coca-Cola's iconic Christmas TV commercial, taking on Elton John for John Lewis and Take That for M&S in the traditional festive battle. Shown across 16 European countries, the advert will be backed by a budget of £50 million.

Then, next spring, comes an

18-date UK tour to include a concert at the Royal Albert Hall on 19 May, on the first anniversary of Harry and Meghan's wedding. Does Karen think they'll attend? 'Well, they live just down the road,' she says, with a twinkle, 'so who knows?'

She never stops thanking God. So what are the challenges that come with all this good fortune? 'When you move into a different space, your mind has to change accordingly. You have to expand your thinking to negotiate the new path you're taking. But, as Jonathan Shalit keeps telling me, these are good problems. My attitude is that, if people come up to me to say thank you or give me a hug, that's a gift. Something happened on 19 May that really resonated with the viewing public. And I cannot say enough good things about Meghan being a woman of colour and the influence of that on people's perception of the Royal Family.'

'It's been good for Britain, too. We're a multicultural society and, now that she's become a public figure, it demonstrates our diversity and inclusivity. A member of the choir has a four-year-old daughter. When she saw us singing on the telly, she said, "Look Mummy, those people look like me." That small statement was huge.'

For details about the album and tour, visit kingdomchoir.com.

IT FELT LIKE BEING ROYAL FOR THE DAY!

Karen's key singers recall their memories of the royal wedding – and how the choir has changed their lives

CLINTON JORDAN The former session singer, 42, has been a backing artist for Tina Turner, Mariah Carey and Michael Bolton and now runs an agency for music teachers, as well as singing in the choir: 'On the morning of 19 May, we were taken by coach from outside Buckingham Palace to Windsor. I couldn't understand why there was no traffic holding us up, then I spotted the police outriders on their motorbikes who accompanied us all the way. I remember thinking, "This is what it must feel like to be royal." And I tell you: it's the only way to travel. We'd sung before at a number of high society weddings but this was something else. I remember looking out from our choir stall. There was Serena Williams, there was Oprah and George Clooney with Amal, famous people wherever you looked. Yet the feeling everywhere was so warm, so relaxed. It meant we weren't overwhelmed by the occasion. We just wanted to make this lovely couple's special day as memorable as possible.'

'For me, the most magical moment was when Meghan said, "I do." There was a roar from the crowd outside. It was as though the fairy tale was complete.'

ANDREA & JAMES FRANCIS Andrea, 37, is a business development manager for a charity and a soprano in the choir: 'I joined the group in 2015, and it came at just the right time in my life. I'd had health problems that resulted in an operation and the devastating news that it was highly unlikely I'd ever be able to have children. I'd known Karen since 2010 and she came to my rescue. I was trying to get back on my feet and music helped to heal me. I knew

James already but Karen acted as Cupid.'

James, 32, is a session singer and an Uber driver: 'Andrea and I first met at a concert in 2011; Karen introduced us. But I'd been living and working in America and was going back there. When I returned to the UK in 2012 I joined the choir and I gradually became attracted to Andrea. Then, one day, I said to myself, "She has to be mine."'

Andrea: 'We married in December 2016 then our little miracle came along. I thought I'd never know the joy of motherhood, then Jonas arrived in April. He's six months old now, a happy and healthy baby.'



Andrea, James, Clinton and Stacey stand around choir master Karen (centre)

James: 'I remember love with each other.' rubbing shoulders with Elton John and thinking how strange it was that I was the one who was going to be singing. Life hasn't been quite the same since.'

STACEY SKEETE A featured soprano in the choir, Stacey, 29, joined the group at 16, studied at the Brit School in the year below Adele, and has worked as a music teacher and backed Ed Sheeran on tour: 'The choir has become central to my life. As a 14-year-old, I experienced sexual violence but I refuse to see myself as a victim. I'm a survivor and a lot of that is down to the choir, and Karen. She provided me with a nurturing lifeline. She gave me a safe place where I could become confident again.'

'So much has happened since the royal wedding and in such a short space of time. Someone recognised me in the street the other day. Unbelievable. You couldn't write the script, could you?'

LUCKY GUY Monday is Bonfire Night. Queen Elizabeth I was such a fan of fireworks she had a 'Fire Master of England'

Prince Charles meets the choir (below); outside the Chapel, after their stunning performance (right)



The KINGDOM CHOIR

Their rendition of Stand By Me at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle enchanted millions. Richard Barber reveals how a single phone call from the Royal office propelled a group of Pentecostal choristers to stardom

It was the beginning of April and Karen Gibson was travelling on a Number 87 bus when her phone rang. The caller was Eva Williams, the deputy communications secretary to HRH The Prince of Wales and HRH The Duchess of Cornwall. Would The Kingdom Choir like to sing at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle?

'My instinctive reaction,' says Karen, 55, 'was to ask if she was joking. But my question was met with silence. So I said: "You're not joking, are you?" And then we continued our conversation.' Prince Charles, she was later to discover, is a fan of gospel music. He'd heard Karen's Kingdom Choir sing at The Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2002 and recommended them to his younger son and future daughter-in-law.

A visit to St George's Chapel Windsor soon followed so Karen could check the acoustics ahead of the big day on May 19, before checking the availability of her choristers

'Prince Charles recommended the choir to Harry and Meghan'

- without being able to tell them why. 'I just asked them to keep that date free. Two weeks later, I was told I could announce it to the choir, as long as they told no one.'

Karen and six of her choristers were then invited to Kensington Palace to meet Harry and Meghan, and to discuss the arrangement of Stand By Me, the Ben E King hit they were to sing so memorably at the wedding ceremony. 'They were both lovely: relaxed and friendly and obviously very much in love. The thing that struck me most was how normal they seemed. We were there for about an hour, chatting over tea and biscuits. And we sang a little for them.'

The couple liked what they heard, but they were by no means a pushover when it came to approving the choir's version of the song. 'When we sent them a CD of the finished arrangement, they thought it was too much, too elaborate. It wasn't the stripped-back sound they were looking for.' There followed much to-ing and fro-ing.



The Royal couple, newly wedded at St George's Chapel

Indeed, it wasn't until the tenth version that Harry and Meghan were pleased with the arrangement. 'It was quite a long way from our gospel roots, but it's what they wanted. And they were right: when it came to it, I could see it was in keeping with the rest of the service.'

What a difference a day makes! 'It started the moment we left the Chapel on May 19,' recalls Karen. 'Nobody had given us a second look when we'd walked in to St George's. Now everyone was clamouring for autographs and selfies. We had to be escorted by bodyguards, for heaven's sake! By the end of the day, our website had crashed.' And it didn't stop there. Top British talent manager, Jonathan Shalit, secured a record deal with Sony, and *Stand By Me*, the album, was released in October, just as the choir was returning from Sydney having performed at the closing ceremony of Prince Harry's Invictus Games for injured ex-servicemen and women.

Next up – and it's a remarkable coup – the choir will sing on Coca-Cola's Christmas advert for TV, taking on Elton John for John Lewis, and *Take That* for M&S, in the traditional battle of the Christmas commercial. Shown across 16 European countries, the ad will be backed by a budget of £50m. Next spring comes an 18-date UK tour to include a concert at the Royal Albert Hall on May 19, the one-year anniversary of Harry and Meghan's wedding. Does Karen think they'll attend? 'Well, they live just down the road,' she says with a twinkle, 'so who knows?'

With her infectious laugh and that distinctive plaited mass of silver hair piled high on her head, Karen is hard

'Nothing beat the feeling on the day itself: there was effort, excellence'

to miss. But it's more than that – she commands respect. She formed the prototype of what became the choir in the mid-90s, when she was still working, unhappily, in IT. Five years later, she got the sack and was able to follow her destiny. 'I belong to a Pentecostal church called The God of Prophecy, with its own District Choir in London. I was called in to help with various choirs round the capital's churches, augmenting them where necessary with members from the District Choir. One of these choirs was invited to sing on BBC Songs of Praise in celebration of the show's 35th birthday. I had to find a name for them overnight. It came to me in a dream: The Kingdom Choir.'

Part of the choir's success, of course, is its individual members. Tenor Clinton Jordan, 42, won't easily forget the Royal Wedding. 'We'd had one rehearsal in St George's Chapel,' he recalls, 'so we could get used to the acoustics. But nothing beat the feeling on the day itself: everywhere you looked there was effort, excellence, precision. For me, the most magical moment was when Meghan said: "I do." There was a roar from the crowd outside. It was as though the fairy tale was complete.'

For soprano Andrea Francis, 37, and husband James, 32, The Kingdom Choir holds a special place. Their relationship blossomed quickly while singing together; they got married in December 2016 and in April welcomed baby Jonas. 'We think we're in charge of our own destiny,' says James, 'but we're proof that it simply isn't true.'

Soprano Stacey Skeete, 29, had originally been in Karen's youth choir, UPC, and joined The Kingdom Choir at age 16. 'Karen took me under her wing and helped me gain confidence. We recently came back from the Invictus Games... so much has happened, and in such a short space of time. Someone recognised me on the street the other day. Unbelievable. You couldn't write the script, could you?'

So much positivity has flowed from May 19, says Karen. 'Something happened that day which really resonated with the viewing public. And I cannot say enough good things about Meghan being a woman of colour and the influence of that on people's perception of the Royal Family. It's been good for Britain, too. We're a multicultural society, and now that she's become a public figure, it demonstrates our diversity and inclusivity.' ■

◆ The Kingdom Choir will perform on Sunday, 25 November as part of the Songs of Praise Gospel Choir of the Year Competition on BBC1. For tour details and to buy *Stand By Me*, the CD, contact kingdomchoir.com

Prince Harry and Meghan's wedding choir stuns with a spiritual zeal



FIRST NIGHT Kingdom Choir

Union Chapel, N1

★★★★★

Simon Broughton

IT'S amazing what a royal wedding can do. "Six months ago I would never have seen this," said choir leader Karen Gibson, gazing out at a sold-out Union Chapel. "We are blessed."

South London's Kingdom Choir has been going for more than 20 years, but in May they performed at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. After the sermon of the garrulous American bishop Michael Curry, their performance of *Stand By Me* was the stand-out event.

Since then, they've gone viral on social media, been signed by Sony and released an album called, slightly predictably, *Stand By Me*.

When the choir walked on stage last night there were huge cheers. Kingdom Choir is a mixed group of men and women, but it has a predominantly female identity because of Gibson at the helm.

Fervour: choir leader Karen Gibson, and top, the singers at Union Chapel

And the Union Chapel, a great communal sacred space, was the perfect location.

The choir sing from the heart, but move charismatically from the hips and shoulders to spread their message around the church. "In gospel music," Gibson said, "we sing together, laugh together, clap together and sometimes cry together." There were musical tributes to the Windrush generation and to Aretha Franklin, one of the greatest gospel singers, who died in August.

At the end of the first half there was a fantastic feeling of community, with Gibson in the pulpit, choir members roaming through the crowd and the audience singing along.

An interval rather destroyed the atmosphere. Part two began with *Stand By Me*, but moved into Christmas songs which, despite their original arrangements, felt rather more commercial than religious.

What was memorable, however, was the bringing together of different audiences for a spiritual performance and great choral singing.

ARTS & CULTURE



REVIEWS AND
WHAT'S ON GUIDES
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The continuing adventures of Meghan's gospel singers

They triumphed at the royal wedding. Now they're one of music's hottest tickets. **Ivan Hewett meets the Kingdom Choir**

It's a grey and drizzly afternoon in north London, but inside the Union Chapel, a church-come-entertainment venue, it's as if summer has come early. Packed into the pews are 20 mostly black singers, dressed to kill. The women have in-your-face shimmering frocks and tops that show off their hourglass figures. The men are perfect lounge-lizards, all tight-fitting DJs, ultra-cool hair styles and silk shirts. In the midst of them, not conducting but clearly the focus of everyone's attention, is a woman with eye-catching silver beehive hair. Suddenly they burst into the gospel classic *Well Soon Be Done With Troubles*. And *Trials*, dancing in the pews to the rhythm.

This is south London's Kingdom Choir, probably the best-known gospel choir in the world right now – quite an epithet, given that the centre of gospel singing has always been the US, and that, less than a year ago, they were just one of many inspirational gospel choirs singing in black-majority churches in the UK.

The gig that changed everything was the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. On May 19, after an emotional address by the American bishop Michael Curry, the Kingdom Choir thrilled a glittering congregation of royalty and celebrities, and a TV audience of around two billion people, with an ecstatic rendition of the Ben E

King song *Stand By Me*. It very nearly stole the show.

Now the choir, which is made up of part-time singers from modest backgrounds, is riding the tide of their newfound fame. In October they performed at the closing ceremony of the Invictus Games in Sydney, and last month sang at the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall, another event traditionally associated with the 'establishment'. They've signed a record deal with Sony Music, recorded an advert for Coca-Cola, picking up a pay cheque for a reported £1 million in the process, and are due to appear on *Strictly Come Dancing* on Christmas Day. A UK and Australian tour are in the offing next year.

But, if you assumed that the choir's success was overnight, you'd be wrong. When I talk to the choir's 55-year-old conductor, Karen Gibson (the woman with the silver beehive), she recalls singing in her local Pentecostal church in south London as a young girl. "Singing was part of worship, it was something that you just did naturally," she says. By her twenties, Gibson had a reputation as an inspirational choir leader. And then, in 1996, an invitation came for one of her choirs to appear on the 33rd anniversary edition of *Songs of Praise*. "They asked me, 'What's the name of your choir?'" And I said, 'I don't have a name.' The producer said, 'Well, you

'Meghan and Harry were very down-to-earth, really lovely people. And they seemed to like what we did on the day'



better have a name by tomorrow'. That night when I was asleep I dreamt the name 'Kingdom Choir'.

So how does she find her singers? Is it by audition? "No, I don't need to, because I know them all already. I meet them when I go from one church to another." What are the qualities she's looking for? Gibson hesitates before replying. "It's not just musical qualities, it's a spirit I'm looking for. It's the way they live their lives, the way they connect with people."

Gibson insists her choir was not nervous before the royal wedding. "When you're thinking about other people, and the gift that you want to give, then there's really no room for nerves," she says.

Gibson also scotches the myth that the invitation to perform came from the then soon-to-be Duchess of Sussex.

"Actually it came from Prince Charles. He's the one who loves gospel."

Presumably they rehearsed extra hard before the big day? "Not really," says Gibson. "The really hard work came before rehearsals, when we struggled to get the right feel and style. [Meghan and Harry] decided they wanted *Stand By Me* during the ceremony, and a medley of *Amen* and *This Little Light of Mine* afterwards. But we couldn't figure out how they wanted us to sing it. Every time we offered a recording of an arrangement they would say it was too gospel." Gibson suggested a meeting might be more productive. "Six of us went off to Kensington Palace to meet the couple. We just came up with something on the spot, and they liked it immediately. They were very approachable, very down-to-earth, really lovely people."

Life-changing: Karen Gibson (centre, silver hair) and the Kingdom Choir at the Union Chapel, top; and at the royal wedding, above

The Kingdom Choir's debut album *Stand By Me* is out now. UK tour, April 30 to May 30. tickets: ticketmaster.co.uk

And they seemed to like what we did on the day."

British gospel music is booming at the moment, with choirs springing up all over the country. "There's something about the music everyone can respond to," says Gibson.

"The themes of faith, hope, love, salvation [and] redemption make it a very powerful form, I would say transformative. I have seen many a young person's life turned round because they joined the gospel choir."

Tyrone Sinclair, now a 33-year-old assistant head teacher who rose from difficult circumstances, can certainly vouch for the choir's positive message. "Karen invited me to sing in the choir, and I said, 'Well, I'm not really a singer.' But she refused to accept my own negative view of myself. She proved to me I am a singer, and that really helped to get over some bad stuff in my life."

Thanks to the royal wedding, Sinclair and the other members of the choir are set to earn a significant amount of money. But it is not money that drives them.

"The word gospel means 'good news'. So we sing to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and his love for us," says Gibson. "Music has the power to bypass all kinds of preconceptions and go straight to your heart. And when you add the inspirational words of gospel, you have something that is bound to change your life."

THE Sun SIMON BOYLE'S bizzarre



Caught LIVE REVIEW The Kingdom Choir at Union Chapel

BIZARRE'S theatre critic **BENJY POTTER** steps into the festive season with a one-of-a-kind carol concert... THEIR performance of gospel standard *Stand By Me* at PRINCE HARRY and MEGHAN MARKLE'S wedding touched millions but THE KINGDOM CHOIR are far from a one-trick pony. This London groups

first major gig since May's big royal event feels like a home at this Islington venue. Choir leader Karen Gibson's chattiness ties together a beautiful patchwork of Christmas carols, pop hits and catchy original tunes. Part carol concert, part sermon – the concert is a happy clappy affair telling the story of the Windrush

generation's arrival in London and the choir's eventual journey to the royals' big day. They never miss a beat, with show-stopping renditions of JOHN LEGEND's *All of Me*, BEYONCÉ's hit *Halo* and their version of the *Holidays Are Coming*, which features in the Coca-Cola advert. A stand-out worth spreading.

★★★★★



Finding their voice: Karen Gibson's choir is hitting the road

She's Britain's gospel royalty

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO SING AT THE YEAR'S BIGGEST WEDDING? AMANDA CABLE MEETS KINGDOM CHOIR'S KAREN GIBSON

Royal request delivers joy ... and that's gospel



JOHN FEEDE

The Kingdom Choir with Karen Gibson front and centre

OLIVIA CAISLEY

Karen Gibson was stuck in traffic aboard a double-decker bus in Battersea in London's south when she received a phone call that would change her life forever.

On the line was a representative from Clarence House inviting her and the group of gospel singers she founded, The Kingdom Choir, to perform at the May wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

"I thought it was a joke at first," said the silver-haired frontwoman who began her gospel career as a child singing at her local Pentecostal church. Yet less than two months later, the choir from south London was taking centre stage beneath the stained-glass windows of St George's Chapel, where they performed *Stand By Me* to an estimated global audience of two billion people.

When asked what it was about the performance that captivated the world, Gibson said: "I think it's partly to do with the fact that maybe they didn't expect to see a gospel choir at a royal wedding. It really caught their attention."

for inclusion and maybe made the royal family more relevant, especially for people of colour."

Since the wedding, the choir has recorded and released a debut album of gospel covers; yesterday, it announced a world tour, and on Saturday it performs at the closing ceremony of the Invictus Games.

"It's been nuts ... but a good nuts," Gibson said. "Before the wedding, we practised in my front room every other week. Now it's twice a week in two different churches in South London."

Gibson said it was an honour and a privilege to be singing for the men and women competing in the Invictus Games.

"I love what the games stand for," she said. "I love the meaning of the name Invictus – unconquered or undefeated – something that elevates people that have been through pretty traumatic stuff."

"Whatever it was we did at the royal wedding, I hope that's what they take away. I hope they receive some inspiration, some feeling of love and hope. Hope is such a potent force."

The Kingdom Choir will return to

Outstanding!

UPLIFTING:
Karen Gibson
leads The
Kingdom
Choir at the
wedding

EXCLUSIVE

By Christopher Wilson

IT HAS become the theme tune of the Royal Wedding, enjoyed by nearly two billion people worldwide and with a further 10 million views on YouTube.

But the man who co-wrote Stand By Me only learned his song had been chosen for Harry and Meghan's ceremony when he saw the video on his phone.

Mike Stoller, the surviving member of legendary songwriting team Leiber and Stoller, was woken in the middle of the night by a message from his son containing the video of the emotional song.

The Los Angeles-based songwriter, now 85, said: "I'd been told it was among a number of songs being considered for the wedding, but that was all. So to see it on the phone - I was completely thrilled."

"The performance maintained all the spirit of the original, yet it was solemn and just seemed so perfect for the occasion."

The tune, co-written with its singer Ben E King, was released in 1961. More than 400 versions have subsequently been recorded by artists including John Lennon, Otis Redding and U2 with Bruce Springsteen.

Though often

HIT MAKER:
Mike
Stoller



That's the verdict of the man who wrote Stand By Me on 'thrilling' version sung at Royal Wedding

interpreted as a love song, Stand By Me became the anthem of the American civil rights movement in the 1960s. It is understood Meghan requested the song after Prince Charles suggested a gospel choir should be added to the wedding music.

"The performance was so beautiful, so perfect. I was very moved," said Stoller.

He said he was bowled over by south-east London gospel group The Kingdom Choir, led by Karen Gibson - and referred to their "beautiful sound".

While the majority of the two-verse tune was created by Ben E King, Stoller provided the iconic bass line and recorded it with King in early 1961. The song, with its roots in Psalm 46, earned the writers £20million.

Up to Leiber's death in 2011 they had penned more than 70 worldwide hits, including Jailhouse Rock, Hound Dog, (You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care and others recorded by Elvis Presley, the Coast-

ers' Yakety Yak and Shirley Bassey's I Who Have Nothing. But none outshone the emotional response that poured out after the wedding service.

Stoller said: "I've had hundreds of emails, many of them very emotional - people saying they were in tears watching that performance."

The first message Stoller got was from lyricist Sir Tim Rice, who was on the road, opening a new show in Maine, and watching the Royal Wedding re-run on TV.

Sir Tim said: "I told him how beautifully it had been done. It is one of the greatest songs of its era."

Stoller, who hopes to bring a revival of his famous-hits show Smokey Joe's Cafe to London, says he would love to meet the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

"I'd love to see that royal couple - they embody so many things that are so important to me," said Stoller, who started his stellar song-writing career in the racially-divided 1950s writing for black musicians.

"Stand By Me took on a certain importance in the civil rights movement and the way it was used in this glorious ceremony has meant so very much to me," he said.



BY ROYAL REQUEST: Meghan and Harry at their historic wedding

Picture: OWEN HUMPHREYS/Getty


BBC
LONDON





STAND BY ME

MEET KAREN GIBSON FROM THE KINGDOM CHOIR



Few people had heard of Karen Gibson and The Kingdom Choir until May of this year. The group from South London found themselves with an estimated audience of two billion when they sang 'Stand By Me' at the wedding of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry. Catapulted from relative obscurity, they now have a record deal from Sony, one of the major players in the music industry. Their album 'Stand By Me' is out in time for Christmas.

Karen is described as the godmother of British Gospel. Her musical career actually began with her playing oboe and piano; she didn't start singing in a choir until the age of 18.

'Going to a black Pentecostal church, music was all around,' she says. 'I learned to sing harmony in church and listening to the latest Gospel hits.'

Her Christian faith grew alongside her singing. Her mother was part of the Windrush generation from Guyana. At first Karen went to Sunday School before going to what she called 'Big Church'.

'Gospel is an oral tradition. I learned to sing alto from a big woman with the biggest, booming voice. You could hear her from the other side of church.'

Karen's dreams of a choir began to take shape when she 'fell in love' with a Winans Brothers' Gospel song 'The Question Is?'. Her first choir, called New Dawn, began with her sister and four friends, all aged between 12 and 18 singing a capella in four or five part harmony in local churches.

Faith wasn't simply absorbed, but was a personal decision. Karen says, 'I used to analyse what was being said to me, not really recognising the love that God has for me personally. Then in my twenties I got into the Word [the Bible], and in my thirties I got into worship.'

The next choir began when Karen was working with worship leader Noel Robinson going to black Pentecostal churches and recording the services for the BBC. Sometimes the church choirs needed help, so Karen took along some singers. 'When we were singing in places like Westminster Central Hall or Greenbelt, which didn't have a choir, I gathered people I knew.'

'There were 25 in that choir – we were just people who liked to sing – people from church.' But the choir had no name. The solution came when the BBC rang to book them and said they needed a name by the next day.

'That night I dreamed of the name "The Kingdom Choir". I didn't have any understanding of what the "kingdom" meant. Now I know it is God's kingdom ... God's realm – the way God works in the world.'

In her forties Karen took time out from the choir and went to Bethel Church in California where she was part of the Bethel School of Ministry for a year. The school describes its mission as 'to equip and deploy revivalists who passionately pursue world-wide transformation in their God-given spheres of influence. Students are trained to continue in the ministry style of Jesus: to enjoy the presence of God, say what he is

saying, and do what he is doing.'

Several of the young people she knew went with her to the USA in the following years and the choir began again with the people who had been with her to the ministry school.

'People coming back from Bethel needed a community so we started "Encounter Night" at my house every other Monday to worship and praise God. Up to 40 of us gathered in my front room – people who were hungry for God.'

That's when Karen sensed God say 'Here's your choir'. 'I tried to brush it off, but I started it with young people who were hungry for God – real worshippers and some older mature voices.'

Their Christian faith – intimacy with God and connection with each other – is reflected in the strong sense of community in the choir. 'We laugh a lot and we eat a lot together,' Karen says. 'It's a lovely meeting of hearts, minds and spirits.'

The invitation to sing at the Royal Wedding came out of the blue. 'We didn't understand what would happen. I thought it would be a lovely day in the presence of royalty and celebrities. I didn't envisage the response,' she says.

"Stand By Me" was the royal couple's choice. We had never sung it like that before. They were very hands on. They wanted a simple sound and were very specific. And they were right. If we had sung it our way it wouldn't have crossed the boundaries of age and culture in the way it has. It touched people.' ►





The choir on 'Good Morning Britain'.

The arrangement was the 12th version: 'We went backwards and forward to Kensington Palace. But we are thankful to the royal couple, as it touched the nation ... and nations.

'I thought it was a Ben E. King soul song, but we researched the roots of the song and found out it was originally a spiritual.' The words of the second verse are drawn from the Bible – Psalm 46:1-3

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*

'That was so exciting for us as we sang the song' Karen says.

It is thought that 'Stand By Me' was originally inspired by the spiritual hymn 'Lord Stand By Me' with its intimate prayer to God to 'stand by me' through

life's troubles. More than 400 versions of the song have been recorded, most famously by Ben E. King, but also by John Lennon and, rather surprisingly by Muhammad Ali when he was known as Cassius Clay.

The song is a popular choice for couples on their wedding day. The Kingdom Choir gave their stirring rendition just before Meghan and Harry exchanged their vows watched by a worldwide audience of billions.

The choir had prayed for the song and prayed for the listeners, 'that the song would touch people'. They'd asked friends to pray too.

'Prayer, praise and worship are part of every choir practice. Everything comes from that. Getting into God's presence keeps us connected to God and to each other,' Karen says.

'So many people said they were in tears as they heard it. People were moved by it.'

Their prayer that the song would touch hearts has been answered much more than they imagined. It has introduced an international audience to their prayerful, joyful brand of Gospel music. ●

Win 'Stand By Me' on CD

We have three copies of The Kingdom Choir's new CD 'Stand By Me' to give away. Answer these three questions correctly and you could be one of the winners.



1. What's the first line of the song 'Stand By Me'?
2. Which member of The Beatles recorded 'Stand By Me'?
3. What's the first verse of the Psalm that is quoted in 'Stand By Me'?

You can enter online at **christmasHOPE.org** or you can send your answers, with your name and address, to Christmas HOPE, 8A Market Place, Rugby, CV21 3DU.

The closing date is Friday 11 January 2019.

Come and sing the Christmas Story

Get together with friends and family to sing the Christmas story this year. Bible Society have produced a special carol booklet, in partnership with HOPE, featuring the words to 12 well-known carols and the Bible story in a nutshell, which gives a new perspective on the nativity. Copies of *Come and Sing the Christmas Story* can be ordered online at **www.biblesociety.org.uk/comeandsing**





THE KINGDOM CHOIR



COMFORT, JOY... & lots of fun!

Our favourite
stars reveal
what makes
Christmas so
special

'I'M SENDING MEGHAN AND HARRY A CARD - AND OUR ALBUM!'

THE KINGDOM CHOIR wowed billions of TV viewers around the world when they sang *Stand By Me* at the royal wedding in May. Conductor KAREN GIBSON looks back on their whirlwind year

The choir are such a happy lot. We love what we're doing, we love each other and we love what's happening now. The love we have for each other is so important because life works by connection.

There's a song on our album called *Living My Life Like It's Golden* and that's how I feel at the moment, with the record deal, UK tour and everything else that's happened since we performed at the wedding.

Normally I spend Christmas with my family, but this year I've been warned to take a holiday on 2 January because it's going to be full-on! Life's completely changed since last Christmas. It's a blessing, but it can be overwhelming.

My favourite thing about Christmas is family, and knowing you're loved. And being able to love. It's being able to spend quality time with them. I don't have anything on my Christmas list. Not a thing! I never think like that. I think more about

where I'm going to be, and who I'm going to be with. I like gifts, I love chocolates and flowers, and I like to be able to open things at Christmas, but I don't mind if I get a gift, as long as I'm with family and loved ones - that's what important. I know that sounds clichéd but it's true. We'll be sending Prince Harry and Meghan a Christmas card this year and a copy of the album!

A favourite Christmas song for me is *Hark The Herald Angels Sing*. The words of the third verse, 'Born to raise the

sons of earth, born to give them second birth', which is the reason why Jesus came. It's so powerful to me and brings a tear to my eye every single year. I love it.

My hopes for the year ahead are that the album sells well and that the songs on the album touch people in the way *Stand By Me* touched people. I want the choir to have a positive impact on the world through music.

◆ *The Kingdom Choir's album Stand By Me is out now. The choir is touring the UK in May 2019*

A Joyful Noise

The Kingdom Choir

From touching the world at the Royal Wedding in May, to now releasing their debut album, London-based vocal collective The Kingdom Choir have had one heck of a year. Nicole Vassell finds out how it's all been

For one couple in particular, Saturday 19th May 2018 was one of, if not *the* most important days of their lives so far. Of course, this was the day Prince Harry and Meghan Markle – now collectively known as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex – got married in front of a global audience of millions, around 18million from Britain itself.

However, it was also a significant day for plenty of others who were invited along to the occasion – Bishop Michael Curry, who delivered the sermon, and cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason, for example, had viewers searching furiously to know more as soon as they had their moments to shine. After all, it's incredibly rare to see black people take up such prominent roles in royal affairs.

Yet it was the emotional performance of Ben E King classic 'Stand By Me' by London's very own The Kingdom Choir that was, for many, the standout element of the service – widely hailed as the most moving moment, and a moment that has proven to be a game changer for the choir, forever more.

Needless to say, taking centre stage at a Royal Wedding isn't an opportunity



that many people will ever get the chance to have – and according to choir director Karen Gibson, not something she ever imagined in the group's future when it officially formed in 1996. However, whether you expect it or not, when an opportunity like this knocks, you don't take long deciding your answer.

"I'd been thinking a few months before, 'Wouldn't it be lovely if they had a gospel choir at the wedding?'" Karen tells me, remembering the day she got that fateful call. "So when you get a call like that, you don't say, 'Oh, let me think about this,' you say: 'Yes, thank you very much, I would be honoured.'"

With the inclusion of a gospel choir believed to have been Prince Charles' idea, royal aides contacted Karen with the proposition in February — and after she promptly snapped it up, she began putting the feelers out to the rest of the choir to keep the date free, without completely letting them know why.

Elaine Simpson, long-time Kingdom Choir member and close friend of director Karen, originally had plans for that date, but rescheduled without a second thought once she figured it out. "When Karen asked me, I said that my family's going up to Nottingham to do some gigs as a family," she recalls. "I asked Karen why, and she said, 'I can't tell you, but Google the date.' I thought, 'What does that mean?' But I put the date in, and up popped the Royal Wedding – so I sent her back that emoji with the eyes wide open, I was like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

Not long after Karen, Elaine, and the rest of the choir were confirmed for their biggest gig yet. Then, it was time to figure out the logistics, including the all-important song choice – a decision ultimately made by the couple themselves, despite Karen's initial reservations. "With 'Stand By Me', there's hardly any beat, or rhythm, just



Choir director
Karen Gibson



Long-time
choir member,
Elaine Simpson

padded out chords,' she explained. 'But that's the way they wanted it, stripped back – and they absolutely hit the nail on the head!'

Over the next few months, the Choir rehearsed until it was time for their starring moment; and when it came, the collective feeling was definitely one of excitement, rather than fear.

"We'd rehearsed it all, so now it was just a matter of doing what we came to do," explains Elaine. "Rather than being nervous, when we were getting to the last chorus, I was like, 'No, it's nearly finished! Just stay in the moment, because it's never going to happen again.'"

Immediately after their performance, The Kingdom Choir's star was on the rise, with TV spots all around the country and beyond, lots of YouTube views and people across social media not only wanting to hear more from them, but enquiring to hire them for events – and even asking about the process of joining!

Following these six months of increased attention for the Choir, they're doing their part to make gospel sounds accessible for the masses with the release of their debut album. With classics such as 'I Say a Little Prayer' and 'Amazing Grace', contemporary hits like a reworking of Stormzy's 'Blinded By Your Grace, Part 2' and original track 'Chases', there's something on their 15-track record that'll make everyone's ears happy.

And if royal invitations and album releases weren't enough, success for The Kingdom Choir is spanning well into 2019 as well, they'll soon be embarking on a nationwide tour, marking the anniversary of the Royal Wedding performance with a show at London's Royal Albert Hall. As a black choir, it's especially exciting to see them going from strength to strength, and infiltrating spaces that previously seemed inaccessible.

"I think it did something – not just for black people, I think it did something for people of colour in general, because the wedding as a whole was very inclusive," says Karen. "I think it helped to bring about some sort of healing; there's a bit of a shift. Someone I met the other day said, 'To see a black gospel choir [at the wedding] was amazing.' People of colour felt a sense of pride and a sense of representation, and a sense of inclusiveness... It brought people together. It's humbling to have been able to be a part of that."

The Kingdom Choir's debut album, 'Stand By Me' is out now. Tickets for their 2019 tour are available at livenation.co.uk

Culture

After the Royal Wedding, a Gospel Ch

LONDON — Karen Gibson wanted some silence. She was standing before the Kingdom Choir, the gospel ensemble she founded and has led for more than 20 years, during a recent rehearsal at a church in the London neighborhood of Pimlico. The group had just been working on a version of “All of Me,” made famous by John Legend, and a couple of dozen singers were enjoying a rambunctious moment of downtime.

“O.K., got to listen,” Ms. Gibson said, raising her arms and her voice. The chattering continued.

“When I say, ‘Listen,’ I’m serious,” she said, much louder. The talking stopped. “You see how things are kicking up. You are going to have to be on the top of your game. When I say, ‘Listen,’ I’m saying it for a reason. Am I clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the group replied.

Once a passion project for part-timers, there’s a new intensity to rehearsals of the Kingdom Choir. It started soon after May 19, the day the group dazzled millions of viewers at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, now the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. For those who hadn’t taken a look at the program, there was the initial surprise of a stirring sermon by Michael Curry, an African-American preacher. Once he was done, all eyes turned to the rear of the church where the Kingdom Choir launched into three-part harmony version of “Stand by Me.”

A song made famous by Ben E. King, an American soul artist, performed by black singers, for an aristocracy that is emblematically British and white. As a bit of culture splicing, it was inspired, though Ms. Gibson said that initially she had no idea that she and her choir had triumphed.

“We’re used to people shouting during our songs,” she said in an interview a few days after the Pimlico rehearsal. “When we were done, all we heard was the rustling of people turning their heads around.”

In the days that followed, the media in Britain anointed Ms. Gibson the country’s “godmother of gospel”; YouTube videos of the choir’s performance have been viewed several million times. For a group whose biggest previous audience was 200 people, the transition from obscurity to international acclaim was instant.

And just getting started. On Friday, Sony releases the Kingdom Choir’s debut album, “Stand By Me,” recorded, in part, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. The group will perform in Sydney, Australia, at the close of the Invictus Games on Oct. 27, and an 18-city tour of Britain, the group’s first, is planned for next year. That will be followed by to-be-announced dates in the United States, according to the choir’s management.

For Ms. Gibson, a natural introvert with a beatific smile, notoriety has been an adjustment. Her elaborate upswirl of pewter-toned hair makes her instantly recognizable, and she said she was getting accustomed to fame, which she finds both strange and exhilarating. As she took a seat for this interview, in a South London cafe, a young man stood to make room.

“Your music helped me through a very dark place,” he said, as he picked up his backpack and moved.

“The weird part is that I am living the same life I’ve always lived,” Ms. Gibson said, after the two talked for a minute. “I go to the same supermarket. I’m making the same music. I’m ordinary. But not.”

Ms. Gibson has been involved with gospel singing since she was a teenager, growing up in the Battersea neighborhood of South London and attending a black Pentecostal church. Inspired by early work of the Winans, who would become perhaps the United States’ foremost gospel family, she, her sister and some childhood friends formed a sextet called New Dawn. The group performed all over England, primarily at churches.

After high school, Ms. Gibson spent “11 unhappy years” in information technology for an arm of local government. When she was laid off, she found a job teaching gospel at a girls Catholic school. She formed the Kingdom Choir in 1994, reuniting members of New Dawn and recruiting others who had the right mix of singing chops and positive energy.

“I don’t audition,” Ms. Gibson said. “It’s down to our connection.” There are dozens of gospel groups in Britain and many were more prominent than the Kingdom Choir. But one former Kingdom member knew Eva Williams, Prince Charles’s deputy head of communication. Ms. Gibson was riding a bus one day in March when her cellphone rang.

“We’d like to invite you to sing at the royal wedding,” Ms. Williams said.



Choir Hits the Big Time



"Mostly what I felt was disbelief," Ms. Gibson remembers. "Right up until the wedding, I kept thinking, this is going to fall through." She was initially instructed not to tell anyone, a challenge for a conductor who needs 20 singers to clear their calendar, months in advance.

Elaine Simpson, a choir member and longtime friend, was one of those recruited. "Karen called me and asked if I was free on May 19," Ms. Simpson said. "I said, 'I'm not free. Why?' And she said, 'Google the date.' I was thinking, what is the point of Googling a date?"

In an instant, Ms. Simpson decided she could be free on May 19. Gathering members was the easy part. The challenge was coming up with an arrangement of "Stand by Me," a request of the royals, that the couple liked. The first version, sent via MP3, got a polite, "No, thank you." Prince Harry and Ms. Markle wanted it stripped down and less syncopated, Ms. Gibson said.

Versions two, three, four, five and six were all rejected with the same directive: Pare it back. So Ms. Gibson suggested a face-to-face meeting with the couple. Off she went to Kensington Palace with five singers and a keyboard player.

"They were lovely," she said. "And I just walked through an arrangement on the spot. 'Do 'oohs' here. The second verse will come in here.' And the minute we started to sing, I could just feel their approval, the joy, the effect. Both of them said, 'That's the one.'"

It wasn't. When the choir recorded the new arrangement, it reacquired "bells and whistles," Ms. Gibson's shorthand for more complicated rhythms and additional harmonies. Versions seven, eight, nine, 10, 11 and 12 were all turned down.

With no time left for more back and forth, the choir improvised what amounted to version 13 on wedding day. The members met that morning at Buckingham Palace and drove roughly 25 miles to St. George's Chapel with a police escort.

"We were so ready," Ms. Gibson said of the performance. "We just prayed that this gift of a song was accepted."

Only during the end of the second number, "This Little Light of Mine" — sung as the royal couple left the church and got into a horse-drawn carriage — were there claps and cheers. A few attendees offered congratulations. The actor Tom Hardy gave Ms. Gibson a hug. Then bodyguards came to escort her and other members to a press room, where the group got its first taste of celebrity.

"It was a bit of pandemonium," Ms. Simpson said. "We were trying to get to the BBC studio with this escort and we were literally mobbed. People came up to us crying, wanting our photographs. But it was all love. Everyone was smiling, laughing."

In a matter of days, the group's Instagram account soared from 700 followers to 32,000. Friends and well-wishers called, as did a talent manager, Jonathan Shalit. He'd seen a story about the choir and noticed that Ms. Gibson hadn't mentioned anything about an album — either a deal or an imminent release.

"They didn't even have a P.R. person, but I managed to track down a contact for her," Mr. Shalit said in an interview. "When I found out that they didn't have a record deal, I was gobsmacked."

His pitch to Ms. Gibson emphasized the rewards of the here rather than the hereafter.

"He asked me, 'If you had any amount of money, what would you do with it?' " she recalled. "And I said, 'I want to look after my mum. I want to pay off her bills. Pay off my bills.'"

With the promise of added income has come added work. Rehearsals are now twice a week, instead of once every two. Some choir members have quit their full-time jobs.

But even as the Kingdom Choir goes pro, it has kept the jubilant atmosphere that has long defined it. For every stern word that Ms. Gibson uttered at the Pimlico rehearsal, there were 20 of pure encouragement. The night ended with the choir listening back to a track they'd recorded for the album. It was Jill Scott's "Golden," and for many in the room, it was the first time they'd heard the finished product.

The choir was on its feet, singing along to their own voices, dancing and jumping, an almost athletic outburst of bliss. In a corner, Ms. Gibson beamed, clapped and joined in on the chorus: "Living my life like it's golden, living my life like it's golden."

THE
KINGDOM
CHOIR



Hallelujah!

It's your 31-page Weekend gift guide, with 190 brilliant ideas for all ages and budgets. Plus our columnists' picks and interviews with the heroes of 2018 - starting with The Kingdom Choir, the musical stars of Harry and Meghan's wedding



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Evening Standard

MEGHAN CHOIR RAISES ROOF AT OUR AWARDS

The
**Progress
1000**

LONDON'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE 2018

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The Kingdom Choir, who sang at Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding in May, perform at the Evening Standard's Progress 1000 awards where Home Secretary Sajid Javid was named most influential Londoner



**FULL
STORY
PAGES
6 & 7**

It's the gospel truth ... we changed our tunes for Meghan

by DANIEL BINNS

THE Duke and Duchess of Sussex had the gospel choir who performed at their wedding change their musical arrangement 11 times before it was 'absolutely right'.

The Kingdom Choir's rendition of Stand By Me was 'stripped back' so many times, Meghan and Harry didn't hear the final version until they were in St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle to say their vows. 'We didn't just turn up and sing,' said choir leader Karen Gibson.

'Harry and Meghan were very involved because they knew exactly how they wanted that song performed.'

She said that when the Clapham-based choir first rehearsed Stand By Me, they put down an arrangement that was 'pure gospel'.

Karen, 54, added to Hello! magazine: 'It was a really full-on sound, which we are used to singing. Gospel music is all about the cherries on top and it's not about stinting on anything. But we got

The last Stand: Karen and her choir singing the 'amazing' final version for Meghan and Harry (inset) PICTURES: BBC



word back that they wanted a little less, so we did a second version that had an Etta James arrangement - but again we had word back that it wasn't right.'

Initial communications were on email via a royal aide, but the group eventually went to Kensington Palace for an informal meeting with Meghan and Harry.

'We went into a few new arrangements and heard what they had to say,' said Karen. 'We thought we'd done a

very simple version but they wanted it even more simple, so we were back to the drawing board.'

After making so many changes, the group were 'nervous' about the couple's reaction to their performance on the big day last May. 'While we weren't nervous about performing, I was nervous as to whether this would be exactly what they wanted,' Karen admitted. 'It felt incredible on the day.'

Soprano Elaine Simpson added: 'We all hoped they loved it and then when they walked back down the aisle Meghan mouthed, "Thank you". Prince Charles leaned in and said, "That was amazing". That felt wonderful.'

Waitrose weekend



24 HOURS ON MY PLATE KAREN GIBSON

*The Kingdom Choir
conductor had a busy day
performing and rehearsing*

LOVELY DAY
FAITH
LOVE
GOSPEL
FIX YOU
GOLDEN
FAITH
INSPIRATION
COMMUNITY
THE KINGDOM CHOIR
HALO
KAREN GIBSON
FAMILY
HOPE
MUSIC
GOSPEL
CHASES
ROYAL WEDDING
ALL OF ME
HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING
GOLDEN CHASES
COMMUNITY
MUSIC
GOLDEN CHASES
YOU'RE THE VOICE
COMMUNITY
SAY A LITTLE PRAYER
LOVELY DAY
MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE
LOVELY DAY
HOPE
GOSPEL
KAREN GIBSON
LOVE
LOVE
LOVE
MUSIC
FAMILY
GOSPEL
HOPE
FAMILY
ALL OF ME
PRINCE HARRY
PRINCE HARRY
SOMETHING INSIDE SO STRONG
AMAZING GRACE
ROYAL WEDDING
GOLDEN
CHASES
MUSIC
ROYAL WEDDING
ALL OF ME
YOU'RE THE VOICE
STAND BY ME
STAND BY ME
FAMILY
SAY A LITTLE PRAYER
HARVEST FOR THE WORLD
INSPIRATION
CHASES
GOLDEN CHASES
COMMUNITY
MUSIC
GOLDEN CHASES
YOU'RE THE VOICE
COMMUNITY
SAY A LITTLE PRAYER
LOVELY DAY
MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE
LOVELY DAY
HOPE
GOSPEL
KAREN GIBSON
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ALL OF ME
YOU'RE THE VOICE





KINGDOM

UNITED

— BY HAZEL DAVIS —

Can a gospel choir really become one of UK music's hottest musical exports? **Jonathan Shalit** and **Sony Music** certainly think so, after the **Kingdom Choir's Royal Wedding** performance catapulted them to global attention. *Music Week* investigates...



A choir place: The Kingdom Choir, featuring Karen Gibson (in blue cardigan) and Elaine Simpson (front right)

PHOTO: Andrew Whitton

There was a touching moment during the BBC's coverage of the wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in May this year. As Kingdom Choir conductor Karen Gibson raised her arms, crescendoing the singers through Stand By Me, Harry looked at Meghan longingly. Finally, she noticed, looked up and gave him a huge grin. It turned out it was exactly what the UK needed.

For the Kingdom Choir, the first gospel choir to sing at a British Royal wedding, it was pretty special too. Watched by 29.19 million people in the UK and an estimated two billion worldwide, the wedding appearance turned the choir into a global brand overnight. Its recording of Stand By Me went straight in at No.1 on the US Hot Gospel Songs Chart after the wedding and since May, the BBC's video of Stand By Me has received more than 5m views on YouTube.

Now the choir has a record deal with Sony Music Commercial Group and its first album, also called Stand By Me, is set for release on October 26 worldwide.

But this wasn't some unknown backwoods choir. Gibson was already a well-respected conductor and musician and had performed at Buckingham Palace with one of her children's choirs before the call came to play at the Royal Wedding. Nonetheless, the response from the public, says Gibson, has been "overwhelming." Speaking fresh from an RAF 100th centenary event at the Royal Albert Hall, she says, "It's like we're real stars" before adding: "It's still early days. It's a short time out of our lives. I still go to Asda. In any case, I don't want to get used to it. It's a privilege and an honour."

Watching them on TV, talent manager Professor



"The demand for the Kingdom Choir is ceaseless. Every day we're getting requests from all over the world..."

JONATHAN SHALIT,
INTERTALENT
RIGHTS GROUP

Jonathan Shalit OBE, chairman of the InterTalent Rights Group, saw the choir's potential.

"I turned to my wife and said, 'I want to work with them,'" he says. For him, the clincher was "the effortless way they sang the song, with no ambition for it to be the moment that changed their lives."

Usually, "An artist would use an event like this to promote themselves," he says. "They'd see the world watching and make the most of it. Which is, of course, fine, but in this case you could see the choir had extraordinary integrity, an extraordinary love for what they did and for each other. There was a real innocence in how they performed, with no ambition at all except singing in a heart-wrenching way. This was not a career day, it was a day of love."

But it just so happened that everyone was watching.

"On the one hand you had this historic global event and on the other an intimate family gathering," says Shalit. "It was perfect."

Two weeks later, Shalit read an article in The Guardian about Karen Gibson, describing her as the 'godmother of gospel'. "The one thing she didn't mention was a record deal."

So he emailed and they spoke for an hour on the Bank Holiday Monday. "When I told her they could sell millions of records, she didn't believe me," he smiles.

The choir themselves insist that world stardom wasn't in their sights when the Royal Wedding call came.

"We were recording our first EP at the time," laughs Gibson. "You don't do that if you think you're about to get a major record deal."

Shalit, alongside co-manager Naomi Everson of InterTalent Rights Group, eventually signed the choir to Sony, he says, "because they offered a vision and understanding. Karen comes from a gospel choir and her starting point was not, 'How much money can I make?' She wants to take the joy of what she does to the world."

Phil Savill, MD of Sony Music Commercial Group, confirms the major sees the choir as "long-term artists". "There will be an album number two and three," he asserts.

"My ambition for all my clients is to conquer the world," says Shalit. "But these people come together to rehearse every week because they love spreading the gospel. They don't come together to be treated like pop stars. Some of them have no ambition to conquer the world."

But they just might, whether they like it or not. Shalit says the choir has been asked to record the official Coca-Cola song for the brand's Christmas advert, to be shown, according to him, in 14 countries worldwide.

There are confirmed appearances on Strictly Come Dancing, BBC Breakfast, The One Show and Songs Of Praise. They'll be in Australia for the Invictus Games Closing Ceremony on October 27, in London for a headline concert at Union Chapel on November 28, followed by gigs in America, Holland and Germany in December. Then there's an 18-date UK tour starting in April 2019 and an American tour planned for September 2019.

It's all part of Savill's plan for "getting them in front of people and visible on every platform."

The biggie, he says, will be The One Show on the week of release, followed by BBC Breakfast and Pride Of Britain. "It's a phenomenal TV plot," he says. "And the moment people see them perform, that's when it happens."

"The demand is ceaseless. Every day we're getting requests from all over the world. Everyone who's having a personal family event," says Shalit, who says invitations have included a forthcoming "family celebration for a global rock star".

Gibson founded the choir in 1995, calling it The Kingdom Choir after being asked to sing on Songs Of Praise.

"I actually dreamed the name," says Gibson. "And that's when we became an official entity." The line-up came



together semi-organically, she says. “If I am honest it’s by invitation and connection. That way we know everybody is singing from the same page.”

On the day of the Royal Wedding, the choir comprised 20 existing members and some hand-picked singers from around the UK, drafted in for the occasion. Gibson was sworn to secrecy and the choir members didn’t know they were singing at such an illustrious event.

Clinton Jordan was one such member drafted in at the 11th hour. A former BRIT School student and London Community Gospel Choir member, Jordan has worked with Celine Dion, Mariah Carey and Tina Turner.

“I’ve known Karen for a while,” he says, “And we’d always been in touch through education and performance. My wife was taking my daughter to a gig and she bumped into her. She asked if I was free to sing at a wedding and I said, ‘Yeah I can sing at the wedding of a person called Harry. I didn’t suspect a thing!’”

The wedding was an incredible opportunity, says Jordan but, he adds, “I was really excited at the thought of working with Karen.”

One of the loveliest things about the choir is the members’ sheer love of singing and being together. Says Jordan: “The wedding was a completely genuine display of two people in love and that is always a great thing to be a part of. It was only when I looked out into the congregation and saw Oprah and Tom Hardy – and heard the roars from outside – that I realised how huge it was.”

Stand By Me is a collection of well-known and loved songs, including the title track, arrangements of Beyoncé’s Halo and Coldplay’s Fix You, and a couple of gospel standards in Amazing Grace and Something Inside So Strong. There’s even a Christmas tune – Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.

The album, recorded over four weekends and co-produced with eminent classical crossover producer Jon Cohen, is not along the same lines as the original EP the choir were planning.

“We were going to do originals [one of which, Chases, is on the new album],” says Gibson, “But even the covers we’ve done are infused with the same spirit and joy in our faith.”

The choir had a say in the music choices, others came about organically and the label suggested a couple. John Farnham’s hit You’re The Voice was suggested to tie in with the choir’s appearance at the Invictus Games.

“Our manager suggested a big Australian anthem so I had to do an arrangement of that,” says Gibson. “I sent it through and it proved popular so it went on the album. There’s a lot of love and hope on the album and we’re really happy with how that comes across.”

This love and hope may have something to do with why the Great British public has taken the choir to its hearts

Til Kingdom come:
The Kingdom Choir

so readily. The Royal Wedding itself was an unexpected hit, a high in a seemingly never-ending trough of bad news, and watched by millions in the UK, desperate for something joyful.

Says Shalit: “The choir has a relevance which is so right for now. It’s the antidote to the unpleasantness we’re experiencing. At difficult times people look for security.”

The opportunities this will present to the choir members can’t be understated, however much they’re keen to talk about love and spirit.

“This gives Karen a real platform to do her own music,” agrees Jordan, “And it’s a great way to spread our message.”

Elaine Simpson has known Gibson for four decades and is a fellow member of an occasional gospel group New Dawn, which meets once a year. She also teaches singing and runs a gospel choir in Hertfordshire with her husband. She says she’s nervous about going to Australia but recognises the opportunities it presents.

“We’re all at different stages,” she says, “Some of us are fresh out of university, some of us have small children, some of us have solo careers so it’s about juggling this and working out how to do it best for all of us.”

It can be hard work herding 20 people with jobs, families and other priorities around the world. But, “People are making themselves very available,” says Gibson, “We’re all very agreeable! Of course, not everyone can do everything and we’re managing all this. We have a leadership team but things are worked out very amicably. All of us have such a strong connection that it wouldn’t work otherwise.”

Naturally, requests to join the choir have increased since the wedding. Gibson says, good-naturedly, “People love to sing and express themselves.”

The choir have done very well on YouTube but Sony commercial group MD Phil Savill sees them as a driver of physical sales.

“Yes, the music business is changing rapidly but in the meantime some of the old world still exists,” he says, “We see this as a product that’s aimed at a certain market and we expect sales to be 85%-90% physical.”

That’s not to say that streaming won’t come into it: “Some of the repertoire is broad and the versions are incredible, so it will be interesting to see what happens with those. But, for the short term, it will be heavily physical with supermarkets and HMV. Longer term, we’ll look to get the songs onto Spotify and Apple playlists and attract a younger audience.”

Shalit, meanwhile, is convinced the choir are going places.

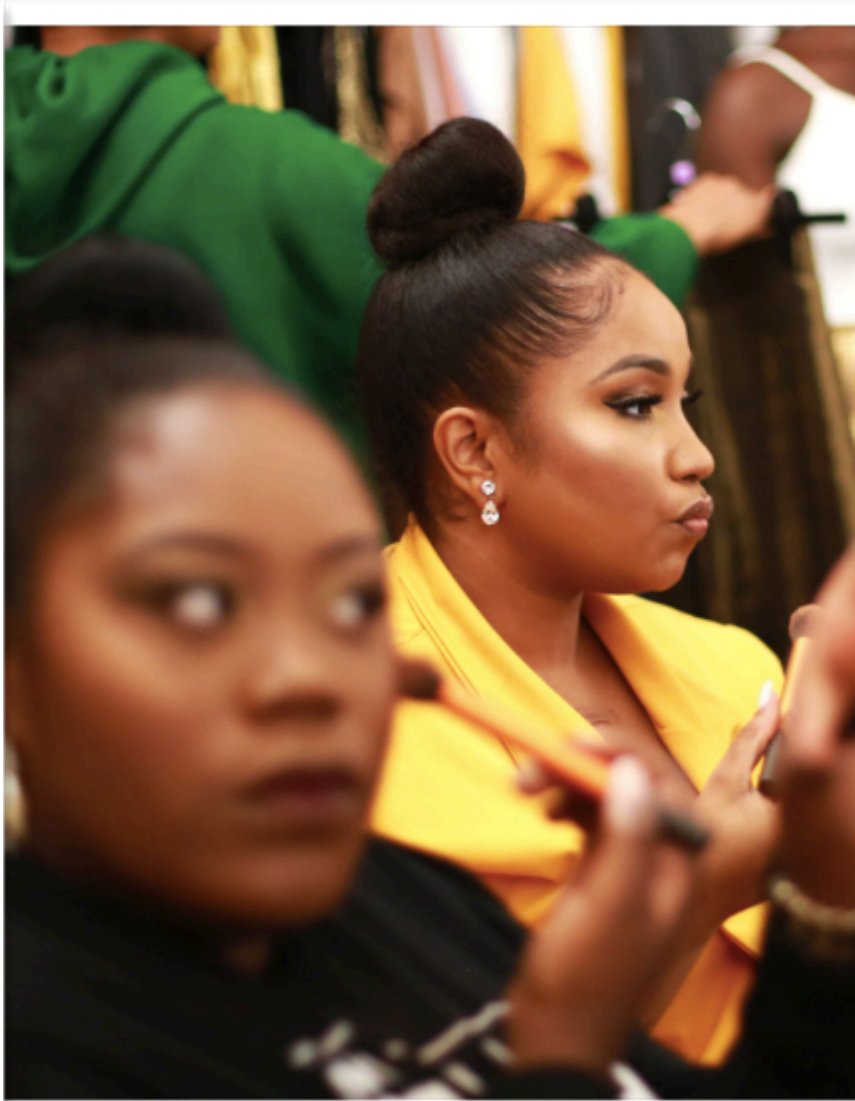
“Working with Karen and the choir has been one of the most enjoyable, mind-changing experiences of my life,” he says. “When you listen to the album you will experience something quite remarkable.”



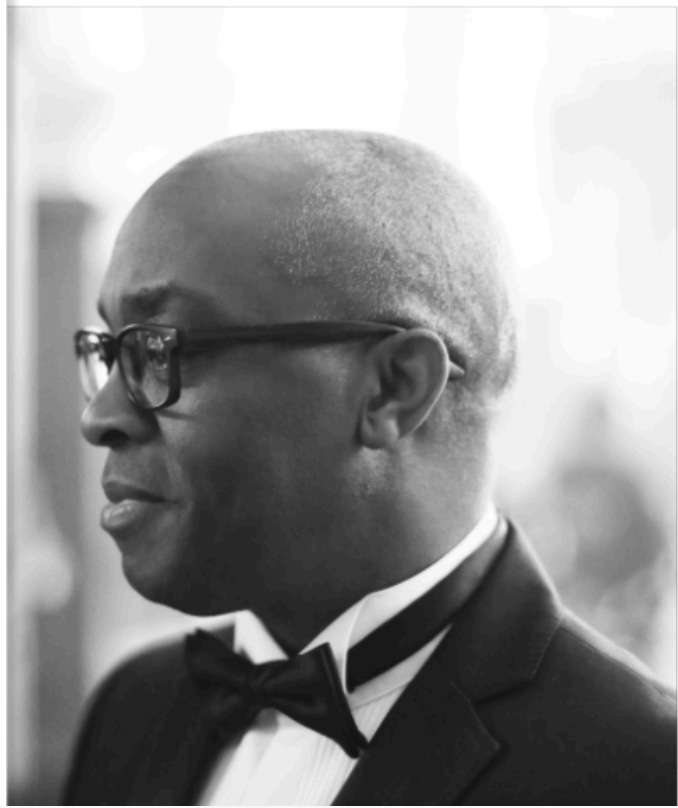
*“There will
be an album
number two
and three”*

PHIL SAVILL,
SONY MUSIC
COMMERCIAL
GROUP











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MAY

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04TH LEICESTER

05TH NOTTINGHAM

07TH MANCHESTER

08TH YORK

09TH GATESHEAD

10TH BIRMINGHAM

CLIFFS PAVILION

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