

Just before Christmas in 2014, I was leaving a coffee shop in Carrboro, North Carolina, when I saw a blue flyer posted on the wall near the back door. The headline read -- in large, disjointed letters like one might find on a box of kids cereal:

## POPUP CHORUS

Below that, there were just a few blurbs. I don't remember the exact wording, but the phrases said something like, "NO AUDITIONS. NO COMMITMENT. JUST SHOW UP AND SING." Below that (in much smaller font) were the date, time, and contact information.

I don't usually read flyers posted on the walls of coffee shops. But I read that one. I couldn't ignore the name: Popup Chorus. What exactly does that mean? "Popup" implies spontaneity, but how does one form a functioning chorus of strangers on the fly? Who goes to something like that? Why do they go? What songs do they sing? What does it end up sounding like?

Fast-forward a few weeks. I'm on my way to Durham to find out.

## Before the event

It's a Monday, late afternoon. Typical January for north central North Carolina – cold, gray – but it has been raining most of the day, so the air is damp and gives the coldness a sort of weight; it hangs and seeps, rather than stings. The sun is about to set. Everything is either gray or brown or some shade in between. I put the directions to the Popup Chorus event in my iPhone. Google sends me out of Carrboro on the back roads, toward Hillsborough and up and around to Durham, to avoid traffic on 15-501. I'm glad. Back roads are best for new adventures and dusk.

First I have to consider my appearance. I'm wearing a blue flannel shirt, khaki pants frayed at the bottom, sneakers, and a corduroy jacket. I wonder if this is right, *if I look the part of a Popup Chorus member*. I decide that I do, and then decide that I don't care if I don't. I had to wolf down my dinner (a large taco salad) in order to leave on time, and realize that my breath probably smells like my stomach feels. I gargle some mouthwash. Grab my car keys, notepad, pen, hat, gloves; time to go.

My car stinks. Bad. A carton of milk leaked on the way home from the grocery store a few weeks ago, just before I went to my in-laws for Christmas, and I forgot to clean it up before I left. So it sat and festered for about a week. Now it

smells like rancid cheese. I've scrubbed it with heavy-duty carpet cleaner, but I think the stain has claimed squatter's rights at this point.

I mention the smell because it's still unfamiliar and a little shocking each time I get in my car (I don't drive much). So the smell takes me off guard, and weirdly, it makes me unsettled, like something is *already wrong* before I've even left the driveway.

And then there is the silence. My stereo is broken. I love music and NPR but, as mentioned earlier, don't drive often, so it's not worth the money to get it fixed. The silence doesn't usually bother me. But tonight, the silence, like the smell, is a bit unnerving. Maybe it's because the silence is punctured only by the disembodied voice of the Google maps woman when she points out my next turn. It's a 30-minute drive to Durham.

## **Arrival**

Popup Chorus is held each Monday night at 6:00, at Motorco, a bar near downtown Durham. The neighborhood is a mix of older blue-collar businesses (e.g. a small Hispanic market, an auto supply store, and a mysterious business that doesn't have a sign and only indicates its purpose with a few trucks parked in a lot behind a barbed wire fence), and the first territorial flags of hipster nightlife (e.g. a café, Motorco).

I can't find a parking spot. I have to park a block away between an unkempt house and a small flat-roofed building that looks like it's been empty for a while.

I walk to the front of Motorco and there are already about 20 people waiting outside. They are clustered in groups of two or three in front of a set of glass doors. The doors are not open yet. Popup Chorus is a non-profit organization but you have to buy a \$7 ticket to participate (a fact I did not discover until I checked the website the day before). The Popup Chorus website also features a link that reads, "Click here to RSVP and invite friends on Facebook." I chose that option, and that option didn't mention the need to buy a ticket. I was confused.

It's now 5:55 pm and the doors to Motorco will not open until 6:00. An 8 by 11 sheet of paper is taped to one of the doors; it tells people to form two lines, one for the folks who already have their tickets and those who need to buy them when they get inside. The sign includes a hand-drawn arrow at the bottom, pointing to the right.

It's dark and the people are all silhouettes, standing in the light from the glass doors. I can already see a wide range of ages – from early 20s to late 60s. Two middle-aged women in overcoats are standing in front me. An older woman with curly jaw-length gray hair walks up to them. One of the middle-aged pair says

hello. I hear a snippet of conversation (something that includes “first timer?”) and then laughter.

Another middle aged white couple stands to my left in the slowly forming line near the door. The man is tall and thin and smiling. He and his wife are reading the sign about the ticket lines. They sense my presence and I sense the need for conversation.

“Yeah, I was confused about the tickets when I saw the website,” I say. “Are the tickets for audience members and not performers?”

The man laughs. “It’s for everyone. There are no backseats in this one.”

We talk about the two artists chosen for tonight’s event: Beyoncé and the Shins. Beyoncé is a multi-platinum, multi-Grammy-winning superstar pop singer, formerly a member of the girl group Destiny’s Child and currently the wife of rap superstar Jay Z. The Shins are an indie rock group known for low-key, thoughtful, melodic songs that resonate with the young and love sick. It’s an odd pairing for this event.

I mention to the husband and wife that I don’t know more than a line or two of any Beyoncé songs.

“I don’t even know who Beyoncé *is*, “ the husband says.

“I guess you’ll be using the crib sheet for the lyrics, then,” I say.

The man laughs, but not as much as I had hoped. Still, the mood is light and friendly. The man has his hands in his pockets and his shoulders scrunched up against the cold.

The doors start to open. A white man in his early 30s, with a shaved head and glasses, talks to the crowd about forming two lines for ticket holders and those without. The 8 x 11 piece of paper on the door is apparently misinformed; people without tickets are asked to go to the left after entering. The crowd coordinator is standing right next to me as he speaks. He mentions that the arrow on the sign is pointing in the wrong direction. I pull the sign off the door and re-tape it upside down, so the arrow is pointing to the left. I do this to signal that I’m creative and adventurous (*see guys? I’m one of you*), and I laugh to signal that it’s a joke. The coordinator laughs, but it seems like he’s just being polite.

We slowly file through the doors. I pay cash to a young woman for my admission. I ask her if the crowd is larger than usual. I can’t hear her answer, and there are a lot of people waiting behind me, so I have to smile and move on.

The inside of Motorco looks like a cross between a factory, an off-off Broadway theater, a bar, and a PTA meeting. It is one single room, maybe 1,200 square feet. The walls are made of weathered brick; the ceilings are high, a crisscross of exposed wood beams and large metal ducts. There are two matching rectangular pieces of velvet artwork hanging on the brick wall near the far right corner of the room. They have an ornate pattern of gold and black filigrees that, juxtaposed with the brick wall behind them, create an interesting mix of art and industry; it makes that corner of the room look like a lampshade factory.

Immediately to the left, just past the entrance, is the bar. It is small, with a wooden counter. There is a large blackboard behind the bar and the drink menu is handwritten in multi-colored chalk. It's mostly craft beers, plus red and white wine. There are no prices listed. A few people sit down at the bar. According to the Popup Chorus website, the doors open at 6:00 and the "singing starts at 6:30." I consider getting a beer, not because I really want something to drink, but because I want something to hold in my hands. I decide against it.

The left and right sides of the room have built-in seating. The left side has a series of large blue wooden steps going about ten feet up, like a section of a small amphitheater. The right side has a long single bleacher on metal posts, bolted down on top of a single step about a foot off the main floor. The bleacher runs in front of a row of windows that make up the right wall.

There are about 50 metal folding chairs arranged in rows in the center of the room, with a makeshift aisle in the middle. A disco ball hangs down from the ceiling over the folding chairs.

At the back of the room is a small stage. It rises about three feet off of the floor. It has a few microphones on stands, including an old-fashioned, pill-shaped stainless steel microphone with holes, the kind that you see in black and white pictures of Frank Sinatra singing.

Popup Chorus uses a live rock band for musical accompaniment. The band's equipment is set up below the stage at the right corner of the room. There is a sparkly gold drum set, an electric bass guitar, an acoustic guitar, and microphone.

A large projector screen hangs down over the stage. The screen shows a picture of a crowd singing (presumably a past Popup Chorus event) and a series of bullet points, "Tips for beginners." The tips mention how to get tickets and how to join the Facebook group, and welcomes the participants to take pictures and post them on Instagram. The group holds a weekly contest; if your photo gets the most "likes" on Instagram you win free tickets to the next event.

The "tips for beginners" bullet points do not include any details about *what actually happens* at these events, or *what you're supposed to do*.



I'm one of the first people to walk in. I decide to sit at the right end one of the rows of folding chairs in the center of the room. More people stream in behind me. Many of them go straight for the amphitheater step section to the left side of the room. I guess that within a few minutes, the crowd will get too large to describe everyone individually. I guess correctly. By 6:20 the room is packed to the gills, all of the seats filled, with over 100 people. My first impression about the demographic is confirmed once the crowd fills the room – the people range from early 20s to late 60s. They are predominately white and well dressed, in a casual, unassuming way. The gender ratio is about 60/40, female to male. There are a surprising number of middle-aged participants, at least as many as the 20-somethings. It makes the crowd look like a collection of college professors and their students.

A few of the participants catch my eye as they enter the room. A woman with bright pink hair sits near me to the left, typing on her iPhone. A barrel-chested man in his 50s walks up the amphitheater steps; he is wearing a cowboy hat, a denim jacket advertising the Hard Rock Café London, a large gray mustache and an even larger smile. A tall, heavy-set young man with a long brown beard walks around the front of the room, shooting video. A pregnant woman -- very pregnant, eight or nine months -- walks slowly through center aisle. A thin man with white hair sits to my right, on the long bench seat, next to a teenage girl. They must be father and daughter; they look like twins. I look around the room for any other

family combos and spot a mother-father-teenage daughter triad on of the amphitheater steps.

Like the family, it looks like most of the people came to Popup Chorus in groups of two or three. But many of the small groups recognize other participants as soon as they enter the room, and strike up conversation. It's incredibly loud and boisterous. About half of the people are drinking beer. Nearly everyone in the room is talking and smiling and laughing. It's the most festive room I've ever seen on a Monday night.

I get the feeling that I'm the only person who came alone. Presuming that this *can't* be the case, I scan the room to look for people sitting by themselves and/or keeping to themselves. Nada. Almost everyone is engaged in conversation. I see two 30-something white guys in the amphitheater section, sitting in silence. But they are sitting next to each other and I get the sense that they came together to the event.

I hear rock music from the stereo system, but the talking and laughter in the room have gotten so loud I can't even make out what song is playing. It was a bit chilly when I first walked in, but now the crowd has raised the temperature at least five degrees. I take off my coat. The room smells clean, not much like a crowded bar, and not like anything, really.

I look over to see my immediate neighbors to the left, a pair of conservatively dressed women in their late 50s or early 60s. They aren't talking to each other much, at least not as much or as loudly as the other people in the crowd. The woman immediately next to me is petite, with high cheekbones, a thin nose, and crow's feet in the corners of her eyes and lips. She has blue eyes and short gray hair. She wears a plain light blue sweater and blue jeans. She looks nervous.

We're seated so close together that our shoulders are almost touching. I feel the need to start conversation, but sense that we will have ample opportunity for that as the night wears on.

The bass player in the band picks up his guitar and starts noodling a few notes. The sound of the bass gets people's attention and serves as a de facto call to meeting. The cacophony of the laughter and conversation starts to die down. A tall, thin man with dark hair and a flannel shirt sits down behind the drum set. The guitarist picks up his guitar. He wears a yellow t-shirt, short unkempt hair and bushy beard; he's one part ancient Greek statue and one part teddy bear.

Another man walks to the microphone in front of the band. He is in his mid 30s with short dark blonde hair, combed forward. He has thick-rimmed glasses and a black sweater vest over a maroon button down shirt and tie. He looks like a cool middle school math teacher. He is the conductor of Popup Chorus.

“Okay, who here is a regular?” he asks.

The conductor lifts his hand, and about half of the people in the room raise theirs too.

“And let me see the new people!”

The rest of the hands go up, including mine. The conductor nods and smiles.

“All right, great. Let’s get started. Everyone stand up.”

And that’s it. We go right into it. We stand up.

The image on the projector screen changes from the Pop Chorus picture and “tips for beginners” to a set of song lyrics. It’s “Halo,” by Beyoncé.

I’ve never heard the song, so I don’t even know the melody, let alone the words.

*How the hell am I supposed to sing a song I don’t know? I can’t be the only person here who doesn’t know this one. Maybe we should hear the song first?*

[Full disclosure: This is not the first time that I’ve sung in front of a room full of strangers. I spent a few years as a musician in Austin, Texas. I was what the business calls a singer-songwriter (translation: guy with an acoustic guitar in a

coffee shop), and I'm not a very good singer, so long ago I got over my fear of making an ass out of myself. But for some reason, I suddenly get nervous before the song starts at Popup Chorus. I start to chicken out. *Maybe I'll just listen the first time through, so I can learn the song. Damn it, no. Sing.*]

The band starts to play. The music starts with a gentle, rolling acoustic guitar section, mellow and fingerpicked like a Simon and Garfunkel tune. It catches me off guard; I expected loud synthesizers and a faster pace for Beyoncé song. Then the bass drum kicks in. Boom, tap, boom, tap; slow, like stomping feet. Several of the people in the room are clapping on the downbeat. Others are swaying back and forth. The feeling of the heavy beat on top of the gentle guitar is intoxicating. And then everyone starts to sing.

*Remember those walls I built?*

*Well baby they're tumbling down*

*And they didn't even put up a fight*

*Didn't even make a sound*

And midway through the third line, unannounced and out of nowhere except the pit of my stomach, comes a swell of emotion. I realize that I'm going to cry. The moment is overwhelming. The sensation goes up from my stomach and into my throat and jaw and I swallow to keep it there, to keep it from spilling out through my eyes. I can't sing because I'm trying not to cry.

I can't explain it. Maybe it's the sound of all the voices together. Maybe it's the music. Maybe it's the words and the unexpected vulnerability of the song. It's not fear, or sadness. It is joy, but that's only part of it and not really the right word. It's like the moment of triumphant happiness at the end a great epic movie, like when the souls of father and son reunite and walk together on the beach at the end of *Tree of Life*. It's the feeling of forgiving, and being forgiven.

We're halfway through "Halo" before I can compose myself and join in. I glance over at the woman next to me. I think she is doing more smiling than singing. I let out a breath and start to sing, knowing that I'm getting the melody wrong and damn near committing a crime by trying to falsetto the higher parts. I haven't been this happy in a long time.

We finish "Halo." The band stops, and everyone claps and many of them laugh. The conductor announces the next song for the evening, "New Slang" by the Shins. There is a pause while they change the lyrics on the projector screen.

I turn to the woman next to me. We both smile and lift our eyebrows, communicating with each other like two strangers who just got off the same roller coaster. I start talking to her without thinking about what I'm going to say. I haven't done that in a long time, either.

I don't want to take notes while talking to someone I'm meeting for the first time -- especially in a moment like this -- and I know I won't remember most of the conversation. I say something about how I'm familiar with the next song, so I'm more comfortable with that one. The woman doesn't know the song. I explain that it was in a movie about ten years ago, "Garden State." She remembers the movie. I mention that I've heard the song for ten years and still can't understand half the lyrics. The dude mumbles. I ask the woman if she is a regular. She says this is her fifth time. She says that she likes that Popup Chorus meets on Monday nights. I think I understand what she means by that, so I say, "Yeah, you *need* it on a Monday. You don't need it on a Friday night." She nods.

The woman goes on to explain the history of Popup Chorus: this is only the group's second season and she's seen the crowd grow exponentially at each event. She lives in Chapel Hill. She works for UNC but doesn't say exactly what she does. I mention how I live in Carrboro and saw the Popup Chorus flyer in the coffee shop. I mention that I'm a graduate student in journalism at UNC, taking an ethnography class where I'm hoping to meet some people doing something really interesting. [I do not mention that this is a formal assignment, because I'm not thinking of it like that and it doesn't feel right to present it like that right off the bat. I'm not here because this is an assignment. I'm here because I saw the flyer in the coffee shop and something about it called to me, and the ethnography was a nice excuse to do it. I had other groups in mind for the ethnography before this. I went to a medieval sword fighting club in Raleigh a few days ago, but for

various reasons, it didn't work out. So I'm just following my gut on this one. I'm not sure it's the best situation for a collaborative ethnography and it can't promise that it will add much to the academic literature, but damn it, I'm already glad I came and I'll keep going, regardless. I'll get down to brass tacks next time.]

The next song starts and we do a dry run, just to feel it out. I'm relaxed now, and since I know the song, I lay into it with a little more gusto. I even experiment with a little harmony, which is ill-advised and I feel like an asshole. I stick to the main melody for the rest of the tune.

The dry run is over. Now it's time to go back and "rehearse" the songs. I put "rehearse" in quotes because it's very informal, almost tongue-in-cheek. It's not that it's a joke. We're really trying to learn the song and get better, we are. We start with the Shins song and focus on tricky areas, the odd phrasing, the departures in the melody, etc. We work out some harmonies as a group. It's structured but still very loose. The conductor cracks jokes while we rehearse. He's very funny and makes you feel like you've known him for years. Whenever there is a particularly difficult part (e.g. the Ella Fitzgerald-style vocal runs in the Beyoncé song), the conductor encourages those who want to try to do it to go for it, and reassures the rest of us with, "Hey, if you don't feel comfortable singing that part, just sing it your way. You own it!"



After we've practiced the Shins song a few times, the conductor says, "Okay, let's record this."

That's the end result of Popup Chorus (not that it needs an end result): after they rehearse the song a few times, they shoot a video performance for YouTube.

The conductor lifts his hand in the air, palm out. "This worked pretty well last year," he says. "When we lift our hands, it's time to get quiet so we can record." People start to lift their hands. The room goes silent.

We start the Shins song, get about 30 seconds into it, screw up a line and the band misses a chord change. It falls apart. Everyone laughs. Then hands start going up in the air again, and everyone gets quiet. Take two.

We nail it the second time, and it sounds pretty damn good, if I don't mind saying. Then we take a break before switching to rehearsal for the Beyoncé song. Beer and/or bathroom for most folks. I stay in my seat and gather the thoughts you are reading right now. The PA system is playing a Cheap Trick song, "Surrender."

*Mommy's all right, daddy's all right*

*They just seem a little weird*

*Surrender, surrender*

The woman next to me leaves for a few minutes, then she sits down and we continue our conversation. Her name is Christine. She is a nurse practitioner at UNC. I mention that I have three kids, ages 6, 4 and 2. She mentions that the Popup Chorus conductor is the music director at Smith Middle School in Chapel Hill. I laugh because that's exactly the sort of job I imagined him having. "I bet he's a great teacher," I say. "He is," Christine says.

The conductor goes back up to the mic. We all sing "Happy Birthday" to two people in the room. That's one hell of a rendition if it's your birthday: 100-odd people with harmony and a rock band.

We get to work on the Beyoncé song. It's a lot harder than the Shins. During the chorus, the room is split into two groups to form a call-and-response. We try to emulate Beyoncé's vocal runs at the end of some of the lines and it's laughable at best. The conductor hears a young man next to him, a burly Pacific Islander, singing a nice harmony and encourages him to go up to the microphone to demonstrate it for everyone else. The man is embarrassed and won't budge. The crowd, of course, won't accept this, and raucously cheers him on until he finally caves and goes up to the mic. He sheepishly sings the harmony part. He's pretty good, but gets off key in the upper range. He laughs and gives up. The crowd goes wild with applause as he walks back to his seat.

Soon, the hands go up. We get quiet and record “Halo,” in one take, surprisingly. It sounds great as a whole, but my individual contribution is worthless. I’m pretty sure I sang the wrong melody entirely at one point.

It’s 9:00 and the event is over. The conductor invites everyone to the next gathering. Someone asks him what next week’s songs will be. He pauses and then laughs. “You’ll find out tomorrow,” he says.

Everyone shuffles out of the room. There is a lot of talking and laughter, but it’s not as boisterous as it was before the show. It feels like the end of a great rock concert. The room is warm. I say goodbye to Christine and tell her that I’ll see her next week. It takes five minutes to get out the door.

On my way to my car, I walk behind a middle-aged woman in an overcoat. She is talking to a younger woman on her left about how she always gets the songs from the Popup Chorus stuck in her head for hours after each show. The younger woman smiles and nods and says goodbye and walks away in a different direction to her car. It occurs to me that the two women probably didn’t know each other but were having a full conversation on the way out of the bar.

Google takes me on a different route home, through downtown Durham. I’ve never seen downtown Durham. I stop at traffic light. There are no other cars on the road. On the right, I see a huge neon sign of a bull on the façade of an old

building (the minor league baseball stadium, I presume). In the distance, there's a factory and a smokestack advertising Lucky Strike cigarettes. It's all new to me, but for some reason, it feels familiar and comfortable.