

Pigeonhole Episode 40

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole. [music fades out]

Meet Low Bar

CHERYL: I was skeptical at first. And then I immediately bought in, was like, “Why didn’t you tell me about these people before?!”

OLIVER: I think I suggested it a couple times, and just nothing about it appealed, basically.

BOTH: [chuckle]

CHERYL: [sighs]

[Recorded clip plays, starting with a distance cheering whistle] BEN: Cheers, everybody! Welcome! It’s been almost six months now that we have been somewhat locked down, and it’s just absolutely amazing that we get to make music together. [end of recorded clip]

OLIVER: I had introduced to you the idea of going, back when it was a live show in a bar. I mean, I remember giving up at some point until Low Bar had this remote participation. We would be in the privacy of your home.

[Recorded clip] BEN: Welcome to O Solo Low Bar. I am Ben. I’m gonna be your host this evening. Am I sideways, or am I not? Hello, Low Bar Chorale! [strums guitar once] [end of recorded clip]

OLIVER: I didn’t even have to be around. You could do it from your computer. It just seemed like you couldn’t hate me for suggesting it. [chuckles]

CHERYL: Absolutely not, absolutely not.

CHERYL NARRATING: That’s Oliver, the one who tried to get me to try Low Bar, the event Ben’s welcoming us all to.

[recorded clip] BEN: I think my next-door neighbors are singing. I think I hear them out there. If any of you wanna go outside of your domiciles, out to your porches within, I don’t know, I would say [laughing] 20 feet of anybody, but if you wanna go outside and sing and see who else is singing. [end of recorded clip]

CHERYL NARRATING: I’ll back up. 12 years. For just over a decade, the quickest way to give me a terrible time is to surround me with people. Even worse if it has loud noises like applause or drums.

OLIVER: It’s noisy, not your scene.

CHERYL NARRATING: I wanna be at home, doing quiet home things. It's not that singing doesn't appeal. I love singing. As a kid, I was well known in my family for never singing in tune, and I learned to feel terrible about that early on. Both my sisters could sing, and we were all in band through high school. But I will still always break into song when appropriate for my cat, RouRou.

Portland's beloved singalong band, [The Low Bar Chorale](#), had been performing their drop-in singalong choirs in bars since 2016. And they, like so many artists who could, pivoted when COVID lockdowns started. They switched to live streaming, first doing small outdoor gigs and then to online only, Ben in the living room. And I couldn't have been happier that they did. Finally, I could go to one of their singalongs on my own terms!

CHERYL: When we watch from home, sometimes I brush my teeth. Like, if it's *Hotel California*, which is really long, I can sing and go brush my teeth and come back and still sing the same song. And I love that. And then I can go to bed at 8:15 PM, which I like to do! And there's no commute home. There's no crowd. It's great!

OLIVER: I might be doing the floss in the living room, and you are doing the floss in the bathroom.

CHERYL: [laughs] You don't floss during Low Bar.

OLIVER: [chuckles] I could.

CHERYL NARRATING: The way Ben talks about [The Low Bar Chorale](#), and this is even in the name—Low Bar—they're about lowering barriers for everyday people to sing. As Ben explains, if you put off-pitch voices together, they average out and sound in-tune, something called "the choral effect." It always sounds great. But what really lowers the barriers is how Ben comes off as such a sweetheart and so welcoming!

[recorded clip plays] BEN: Man, with every song tonight, I'm feeling just a little bit better about the world, and I'm feeling a little bit better about everything. I know you all sounded absolutely incredible on that last one. [casually starts strumming] And I know we're gonna sound so good on this next one too. We're gonna do kind of a subdued version.... [end of recorded clip]

Shifting with the pandemic

CHERYL NARRATING: For something that's totally based in sharing space, I know it was hard for the musicians. It was often Ben at home with his guitar and keyboard facing the love of his life, Jennie, who was behind the camera (and who does backing vocals, produces, and shows off her dancing hands now and again). The bandmates each played on his mini-Jumbotron from their individual cellphone camera boxes. They're lined up onscreen and ordered almost like a lively Zoom call just over his shoulder. For Low Bar, live streaming was about adapting to the pandemic. For me, it was still about ordinary access and disability. For me, it was so reassuring. O Solo Low Bar emerged, the singalong without being in the bar with the people singing along.

[recorded clip, an electric guitar gets plucked] EDDIE: OK, ready?

BEN: Yeah.

EDDIE: Here we go!

NED: [drumsticks clicking in time] 1, 2, 3, 4.

[*Don't You Worry 'Bout a Thing* by Stevie Wonder sung for O Solo Low Bar, featuring Eddie Trujillo: piano brings in the tune]

EDDIE: Eee eee! Ah ha....

CHERYL NARRATING: OK. We are going to pause the story and listen to this song!

EDDIE: ...Anyway, with some good vibes,
I just wanna send this out to everybody out there,
Hey! Don't worry about a thing

♪ Everybody's got a thing
But some don't know how to handle it
Always reachin' out in vain
Just taking the things not worth having but

Don't you worry 'bout a thing
Don't you worry 'bout a thing, mama
'Cause I'll be standing on the side
When you check it out

They say your style of life's a drag
And that you must go other places
But just don't you feel too bad
When you get fooled by smiling faces

Don't you worry 'bout a thing
Don't you worry 'bout a thing, mama
'Cause I'll be standing on the side
When you check it out
When you get it off your trip

Don't you worry 'bout a thing
Don't you worry 'bout a thing [music begins to fade, plays slowly for a while longer]
Mama, mama, mama
Mama, mama, mama
Mama, mama, mama.... ♪

CHERYL NARRATING: That was recorded in a used furniture store where the band set up in full, social distancing from each other and without the full audience. Guest singer Eddie Trujillo was singing through a cloth mask, by the way. But when it felt too dangerous even to be outside a bar or in a furniture store after hours with a few people watching through the windows, it was back to Ben in his living room and the band each in their little squares on screen. When the next pandemic summer came around, they switched yet again to small outdoor concerts in friends' backyards. We even went to one, Oliver relaxed, and me, with my earplugs firmly smooshed deep into my ears and jaw clenched. Yeah, there were people—an invited group to keep it small for social distancing's sake—and there was talking everywhere and there were drums! But it was glorious, my first night out in at least a year by that point. They kept up the outdoor

gatherings until the weather turned, and it was back into the home music cave for a while and slipping out of physical contact again.

BEN: I cannot wait to actually sing with all of you again and do the real thing, and I can't wait to see you guys.

CHERYL NARRATING: And for most of the pandemic, they did this every. Single. Week.

Now, it's summer 2022. They're back in their regular old haunt, the newly renovated Revolution Hall, with people singing together in person, many in masks. They went the extra mile and live streamed some of those events and their holiday caroling downtown, and short live streams from the living room every other week. I just couldn't even. It's so much extra work to live stream! They're taking a break from livestreaming at the moment while Ben goes on tour with a more conventional band he's in, and the all-star members of the Low Bar team tour with other bands.

Virtual choirs

And here's another cool thing they did in the middle of all these regular singalongs that really made my heart soar. They held virtual choirs. Seven of them! Ben recorded himself singing each of the parts with lyrics on screen as subtitles as individual tutorial videos for each part: melody and harmonies. You learn from that, record your voice on your device at home, upload it, and they professionally edit all the voices together with the full band, and for many of them, an ASL interpreter. And Ben could finally hear us singing with him. He finally got that chance to see us guys through the virtual choirs.

CHERYL: Virtual choirs make me sob.

OLIVER: They make you a virtual crier.

CHERYL: They make me.... [laughs quietly] Every time I see a virtual choir, I just bust out into tears just thinking about the reason why people are doing choirs virtually.

CHERYL NARRATING: It's because in the times before COVID, we didn't **have to** do virtual choirs. And with COVID, it's still the only entirely COVID-safe choir.

[*Here Comes the Sun* by The Beatles sung by The Low Bar Chorale virtual choir]

♪ Here comes the sun, doo 'n' doo doo
Here comes the sun, 'n' I say
It's alright

Little darlin', it's been a long, cold, lonely winter
Little darlin', it feels like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun, doo 'n' doo doo
Here comes the sun, 'n' I say
It's alright

Little darlin', the smile's returning to their faces
Little darlin', it seems like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun
Here comes the sun, 'n' I say
It's alright

Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes

Little darling.... ♪

Wrap up

CHERYL NARRATING: But none of this was easy. Oliver knew about Low Bar well before they went online. And even though I can't remember him ever mentioning them, he tells me that definitely tried several times to see if I could be convinced to join him at the bar for a live singalong in the before times.

OLIVER: I think that I wanted to sing with you so much.

CHERYL: And then they went online, and I was like.... It's amazing! [Ben singing Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* with acoustic guitar plays quietly, fades slowly up as I speak] It's so accessible for me. [chuckles] And we get to do it together. And...I actually harmonize sometimes.

OLIVER: You do!

CHERYL: [laughs] Thanks, Ben. [sighs]

[guitar strums lightly shifting from *Pink Moon* to *Rocket Man* by Elton John and Bernie Taupin]

BEN: ♪ She packed my bags last night, pre-flight
Zero hour, 9 AM
And I'm gonna be high
As a kite by then

I miss the Earth so much, I miss my wife
It's lonely out in space
On such a timeless flight

And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
'Til touchdown brings me 'round again to find
I'm not the man they think I am at home
Oh, no, no, no
[Cheryl and Oliver with Ben] I'm a rocket man
Rocket man, burning out his fuse up here alone

CHERYL: Oh, sorry. Couldn't help it!

BEN: And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
'Til touchdown brings me 'round again to find
I'm not the man they think I am at home

Oh, no, no, no
I'm a rocket man
Rocket man, burning out his fuse up here alone

Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids
In fact, it's cold as hell
And there's no one there to raise them
If you did

And all this science, I don't understand
It's just my job five days a week
A rocket man
A rocket man

And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
'Til touchdown brings me 'round again to find
I'm not the man they think I am at home
Oh, no, no, no
I'm a rocket man
Rocket man, burning out his fuse up here alone

And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
'Til touchdown brings me round again to find
I'm not the man they think I am at home
Oh, no, no, no
I'm a rocket man
Rocket man, burning out his fuse up here alone

And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
And I think it's gonna be a long, long time ♪

BEN: [laughs] That was beautiful! Thank you all so much...for singing that one with me. Usually, after *Pink Moon*, we go into Pink Floyd. But tonight, I wanted to do *Rocket Man*. I wanted to do it— Actually, I wanna just shout out to Cheryl Green and Oliver Baker who've been amazing supporters of this show since at least a year ago, probably more like a year and a half. You know, most people find us when we do our Rev Hall dates, but Oliver and Cheryl found us online and have just become such wonderful friends and such wonderful members of our online community. Thank you, Oliver and Cheryl. And I happen, I do happen to know that *Rocket Man* is one of Cheryl's favorite songs.

So, I can't wait to get back into doing this online stuff soon. We're just gonna take a short break. And like I said, there's gonna be tons of other content. So, we won't lose touch we'll be back soon.

[bright ambient theme music]

Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at WhoAmIToStopIt.com, my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.