

Michigan LGBTQ+ Choruses Sing to the Rafters at National GALA Choruses Fest

First gathering in eight years focused on camaraderie and connection



Sistrum Lansing Women's Chorus. Photo: Lou R. R. Zurn



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The [GALA](#) Choruses Festival, held July 10-14 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is something to sing about, and not just because six Michigan-based choruses were in attendance. Among them were PRISM, Out Loud Chorus, Sing Out Detroit, LanSING Out Chorus, Grand Rapids Women's Chorus and Sistrum Lansing Women's Chorus.

The festival, which is the largest LGBTQ+ choral event in the world, gathered nearly 7,000 performers from 122 choruses across the globe to sing, connect and create lasting memories that go beyond pure entertainment.

"The important part is affirming LGBTQ+ people and their visibility through music," says Tim Hamann, an [Out Loud Chorus](#) board of directors member. "It's about supporting each other, promoting each other and validating each other within the community."

Many performers shared that the event was about cheering on other organizations and performers, as the festival is an exhibition and not a competition. Because the event was closed to the public,

organizations relied on one another to be their cheerleaders, and festival performers say their peers did not disappoint.

“[GALA] was packed floor to ceiling with amped-up singers wanting to clap at everything,” says Amy Saari, [Sing Out Detroit's](#) director. This seemed to be the theme for every group’s performances.

Within the first 16 measures of Out Loud’s performance of “Bridge Over Troubled Water” by Simon & Garfunkel, artistic director Saleel Menon says they received a standing ovation, which “set the tone” for the week for them.

“It was the most receptive, electrifying and engaged audience I think any of us have ever experienced,” says Menon. Out Loud also dedicated their rendition of Whitney Houston’s “How Will I Know” to survivors of the AIDS epidemic. Like many other Michigan groups, Out Loud is an intergenerational chorus. Menon says bringing historical context into the pieces helps younger queer people engage with older members who lived through important moments in queer history.

This year was Menon’s first time attending the festival. Now, he says, he “gets” why it keeps people coming back. “It’s a celebration of these safe spaces and safe communities we’ve created across the world, and all of us got to be in the same place together,” he says.

GALA — the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses — is a non-profit organization that serves over 12,000 singers from 190 choruses throughout North America. Its mission is to support, guide and inspire LGBTQ+ choruses and their allies to leverage the liberating power of singing to create harmony and equity for all, according to its website.

“Every social justice movement has had its soundtrack, and the soundtrack always includes group singing. Group singing has always been a social justice pursuit,” says Saari.

“Singing is done with our bodies and is a form of healing. It’s an opportunity for singers to heal themselves and their listeners from the impact of injustice.”

To represent Detroit, Sing Out started their set with Aretha Franklin’s “Think.” Then to tie in Minneapolis, they sang a rendition of Minnesota-native Bob Dylan’s song, “The Times They Are A-Changin'.” Fittingly, the festival took place near a famous five-story mural of Dylan that features lyrics to the song.

Many performances included themes and touched on topics important in queer history and the overall queer experience.

[Grand Rapids Women’s Chorus](#)’s theme was finding home and belonging, which they highlighted in a piece called “I Am” by singer and composer Jennifer Schofield.

“It is composed of affirmations: I am home, I belong, I am worthy, I am loved, I am beautiful,” says GRWC’s founder and artistic director, Lori Tennenhouse.

"When you're in a choir, you go into rehearsal, you sing songs, you perform them. This becomes the soundtrack of every day. And [Schofield] wanted that to have an impact on the singers as individuals, and also the group as a whole."

Darin DeWeese, artistic director of [PRISM Men's Chorus](#), curated a setlist that included the hymn, "Nearer, My God, to Thee." He says they chose this piece for their performance in Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis "to honor the space and highlight the inclusivity of this cathedral to the queer community."

For many, though, GALA and the overall ability to perform as groups of queer individuals is about more than the songs.

"There are not many places that a 20-year-old and an 80-year-old can stand next to each other and experience the same shared experience together. Queer choruses have always been a place for this – not only a place of music, but a place of sanctuary, refuge, and community for all," says DeWeese.



[A Brotherhood of Voices: PRISM Men's Choir on Community, Advocacy and Disco Fever](#)

As the Covid pandemic shuttered businesses and put community activities on hold, PRISM Gay Men and Allies Chorus of Metro Detroit, like so many other choirs [...]

This year's festival was the first since 2016, as GALA typically runs every four years and had to cancel the planned 2020 event due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the world was shut down, local choruses saw their numbers dwindle, as they were largely unable to come together to not just sing (aside from in COVID-cautious ways, like outdoors or in a virtual format), but also to physically lean on each other for support.

"Choral activity across the world came to a grinding halt," says Saari, who also says that not being able to gather to sing at the time was "devastating."

But arguably the hardest part about adapting during the pandemic was figuring out how to live without their support system always around.

"A lot of queer people feel segregated and not always seen or are afraid to be seen," adds Melissa Louise Hews, who is on the board of directors of Sing Out Detroit. "For me, the choir provides a space

where people can be seen, they can be heard, they can be loved, hugged, feel a sense of belonging, and be a found family.”

Now, many Michigan choruses have seen numbers grow tremendously in this “post-pandemic” time, due to people looking for community and a way to combat loneliness, though some local chorus members stress that there can often be a financial burden when attending festivals like GALA due to travel, lodging and missing work. Many choruses offer scholarship opportunities for events that require traveling, and rely on community support, including monetary donations, keeping up with them on social media and attending performances.

This kind of support allows Michigan's LGBTQ+ choral groups to keep representing the state at events to come.

“Michigan has a reputation for high-quality choral music across the country. Michigan has got it going on!” says Menon.