

"For a song: Volunteers get ultimate 'rush' by singing national anthem"

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by B. Lou Guckian

If you've ever felt chills while listening to the national anthem at a ballgame and wondered who the singer was, you're not alone. Francis Scott Key would probably wonder, too.

Composed by Key in 1814 during one of the nation's first battles, "The Star-Spangled Banner" holds a special place in Americans' hearts. And while most people may know the words, few have known the thrill of belting it out before an audience of thousands—a cappella, no less.

"It takes a lot of guts to get up there and do it," says Jimi Olsen of the San Antonio Missions. As the team's sales director, Olsen auditions and schedules performers of the anthem. He says there are more of those gutsy people out there than one would think. And considering that singers are offered no monetary compensation for their services, the number of people auditioning is quite high.

"Last year, we had 250 people between the ages of 10 and 70 audition to sing the anthem at our Spurs games," says promotions assistant Lesley Reichert, who accepts taped submissions from interested singers and periodically conducts live auditions. Most of the invited are professional musicians, including country singer Billy Mata and music evangelists Clifton Jansky, Casey Cortez of The Focus and Wil Wilson of BreakThrough.

But many are ordinary people, such as sixth-grader Erica Gonzaba and 10-year-old Rodney Sherman. They're also members of church choirs, such as contemporary Christian singers Tammy Coleman, Bruce Mather, Derek Martin and Amanda Singer.

And some are found within the ranks of the military, such as Tech. Sgt. Eugene Brown and Chief Master Sgt. Tonya Walker, or 25-year-old Jennifer Ann Felan, who grew up with a learning disorder.

They all have experienced it—what Jansky calls "the total rush."

"You get inside the arena, and you're going over all the words in your head," says Jansky, who first sang the anthem at a Spurs game 10 years ago. "People are hollering and the music is blaring, then boom. The music stops. The honor guard comes out, and your heart starts to pump right out of your chest."

Even so, the thrill of the moment manages to bring them back to reality.

Derek Martin, a 35-year-old pharmaceutical representative, first sang the anthem for the Spurs three years ago. "When I'm finished singing and I hear the clapping, I want to do it again, right then and there."

Several anthem singers say performing in the Alamodome is by far the biggest thrill and perhaps the most scary—but not just because of the crowd's size. "What gets me nervous," Martin says, "is the camera guy who's standing 10 feet in front of me with a wide-angle lens and putting me up on the JumboTRON."

While doing it in the dome in front of 20,000 to 30,000 anxious fans may send tingles up the spines of most performers, Coleman, the Christian singer, admits she still gets nervous each time she heads for home plate at a Missions game before a smaller crowd of baseball fans. "It's still just you and the mike, and that's as raw as it can be."

Coleman says practice and focus are crucial. She blocks everything out of her mind when she strides toward home plate five minutes before the game. "You can't think about whether the wind is blowing your skirt or whether people will like it. You just do your best," she says.

Marc Solis, marketing director for the San Antonio Dragons, frequents nightclubs to search for new anthem singers for his hockey matches. "We've never had anyone do a terrible job," he says. "But I do look for someone who can blow you away when they sing the anthem."

Younger performers tend to fascinate audiences more than older singers, and 11-year-old Gonzaba proves big voices can come in small packages. "The crowds love her," Solis says. "She has a great voice for her age, and she's cute to boot."

Gonzaba has performed since she was 7. She has been a featured entertainer at many local events and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the opening of Frank Tejada Park last December.

Unlike TV star Roseanne, whose mock anthem performance spurred controversy, singers here say that performing the anthem is an honor and they prefer that it be sung in the spirit in which it was written—with respect and sentiment.

Eugene Brown, a 32-year-old military training instructor who once toured with the prestigious Air Force in Blue entertainment show, performing 80 shows in 20 countries, says, "Maybe I'm a patriot, but I love to sing the national anthem."

Anthem singers share a common fear, though—forgetting the words.

Jansky did just that at a Missions game. "All of a sudden, my mind went blank at the second verse, and I rewrote the anthem without skipping a beat," he says. "When I got to 'and the rockets' red glare,' I knew I was home free."

Still, even professionals shy away from the anthem. Reichert, who schedules anthem singers for Spurs games, says that's because the song is so difficult to sing. Most songs on the radio today have a narrow range. The anthem, experts say, has a distinctly wider one.

"'The Star-Spangled Banner' has very high notes and very low notes," says Kim Bianco, Gonzaba's voice teacher, "and the singer must have the range to do it." Untrained voices, consequently, don't have a chance.

Gary Mabry, interim director of the San Antonio Symphony Mastersingers and associate professor of music at UTSA, says the anthem covers the span of an octave and a fifth; one octave being a series of eighth notes, as in do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do.

But Roy Bumgarner, vocal director for the Showstoppers Academy of Musical Theater in San Antonio, says, "The anthem is easy to sing as long as you start at the right pitch, so it's not too high or too low."

How does a singer start on the right key, though? If you don't have perfect pitch, Mabry recommends using a pitch pipe. Bruce Mather never leaves home without one. "I'm not afraid of sounding bad, like Roseanne. I always carry my pitch pipe."

Despite the anxiety of facing the crowds and singing a difficult song alone, singers return to the playing fields time after time. "I've opened shows for Tanya Tucker, Lee Greenwood and Eddie Rabbit," Jansky says. "But singing the anthem at a Spurs game, that's where the rubber meets the road."

And the anthem-singer machine keeps working. "We're always looking for good anthem singers," Solis says.

Like good news that travels fast, good anthem singers are often referred by one organization to another. Some even get discovered, just like 10-year-old Rodney Sherman, whose rendition of the anthem resulted in calls from NBC and New York talk shows.

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