

Checo Tothomaso and the Victoria Soul Gospel Choir: gospel with a "Motown flavour".

By Matt Orlesky

bringing soul to the city

Checo Tothomaso has a mission. He and the members of the Victoria Soul Gospel Choir are bringing the spirit of gospel, R&B and Motown to the capital city. His goal is to spread a positive message of "brotherhood" through his music and he hopes when people, especially the younger generation, hear it, they will be encouraged to open up. "So many young people want to learn how to sing like that, but they're not exposed to it," says Checo, and he is working to change that.

Even though he says playing music started out as just a hobby for him, it has definitely become the focus of his life. While he discovered gospel at an earlier age, and sang in church choirs as a child, it wasn't until dabbling in piano lessons and playing in marching bands, that he went on to discover Motown, R&B and soul. "I really loved that rhythm," he says. "When I went down south to Florida, I was just attracted to that kind of music."

It's obvious that Checo's upbringing in Hawaii combined with the power of soul music inspired him to continue the

tradition of bringing people together. "In Victoria, with our choir, I'm searching for more ethnic people to come out in the choir as well, because a lot of people, they keep everything within, not like in Hawaii... we sing, we laugh, we cry."

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Checo is no stranger to the music industry and has toured extensively. He's played keyboards, percussion and sung background vocals for the last European tour of Motown legend Marvin Gaye and has worked for the "Green Machine", the band that laid down the grooves for "The Commodores" and Lionel Ritchie. Checo has been directing choirs in Vancouver and Victoria since Expo '86 brought him to the West coast and he's also teaching singing, keyboard and bass lessons. Not only that, Checo has worked with First Nations peoples to spread positive messages through his musical inspiration and spirituality.

He brings that positive energy to every performance. "We encourage people when they come to the show. I go 'It's okay, you can dance.' You can just dance and be free and it's good therapy. It's freedom that way, and healing and comforting," says Checo. Members of the choir seem to feed off of the energy Checo brings to even the most

familiar of traditional songs. Watching one of their performances is like watching a great big family get together for a reunion; everyone is excited and full of vibrant energy, hanging off Checo's every word of instruction, as if he was their proud father.

Checo started the Vancouver Outreach Community (VOC) Soul Gospel Choir in 1997, to bring people of different cultures together to deliver a message of peace, hope and healing through song. "In the States they've got gospel choirs all over but not so much here and people, they love it, because they say 'Oh, I remember those songs.'" That's the sort of thing Checo wants to see here and he is always looking for more people to join the diverse range of those who have found the spirit of the music. More and more people are getting behind Checo's message; the VOC choir is 150 members strong and the Victoria choir has grown to over 100 members.

Coming to one of his concerts you'll hear what he describes as "gospel with a Motown flavour" but also includes jazz to bluesy rock 'n' roll and soul. Every concert brims with an infectious energy, guaranteed to get your hands clapping and put a spring in your step. Don't be too surprised if you get so caught up in it that you start singing and dancing along too; but then, that's the whole idea. ☺



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www.vocsoulgospelchoir.com
www.victoriasoulgospel.ca

Checo Tothomaso, director of the Victoria Soul Gospel Choir and self-described "second generation Motown alumni."