

# Song and fun

**WEEKEND WITH**  
**VOCALUPTUOUS**  
**A CAPPELLA GROUP**

Members of the a cappella group Vocaluptuous eat and holiday together, and that helps them sing better together.

By Amanda de Guzman



**CAMARADERIE**  
 Understanding each other is crucial for Vocaluptuous' group members (from left) John Lee, Hazrul Nizam, Timothy Huang, Gerald Tan, Samuel Kan and Simone Khoo

JOSEPH NAIR

**A**FTER performing in Japan, a cappella group Vocaluptuous decided to top off their triumphant concert by going on holiday with each other.

"The client was really shocked," says Simone Khoo, the band leader and a lecturer of drama at Singapore Management University. "She was like, 'you are going to go on holiday after spending so much time together?'"

And the answer was a resounding yes. While Vocaluptuous has been around since 1997 – picking up accolades like being the only local group nominated for Best Holiday Song by the international Contemporary A Cappella Society in 2002, as well as an award for Contributions to the Performing Arts from the Rotary Club – their current members have only been around since 2006. And Ms Khoo thinks their chemistry has never been better.

"People have had to leave due to work commitments, or others, like getting married," she says. "But I think this group gets along in a really unique way – we enjoy each other's company quite a bit."

Besides going on holidays together, the group also loves to get together for meals or a movie. With their diverse personal and professional backgrounds, the amount of time that they spend together is all the more surprising. Their youngest member is Timothy Huang at 23; who studies biology at the National University of Singapore, while the rest of the group

are in their 30s and 40s. While a few have performance or music-oriented occupations – like John Lee, a vocal coach and actor, and Hazrul Nizam, a singer – two of them have more mainstream professions. For example, Sam Kan is a physiotherapist – "We go to him when our backs are sore," quips Khoo – while Gerald Tan is the advertising creative director at Dick Lee Chuo Senko.

"Basically, I don't really have a social life anymore," he says amiably. "Between the performances, practices and my job, there is very little time for anything else."

However, his work with Vocaluptuous and his professional life occasionally meet. "I make quite a lot of contacts with Vocaluptuous, which helps in my line of work," he says. "Also, if I am planning an event, sometimes I will propose the group as entertainment."

Even if Tan doesn't seem to get much personal time, practising with Vocaluptuous sounds more like a pleasurable gathering of close friends.

"Our preparation for the Japanese concert about two years ago was a lot of fun," he says. "We had campouts with nothing but rehearsals, and ate great food at John's place, where his mum always cooked for us. I think we get along so well because we are generally quite similar. And of course, because of our shared love

for music." Khoo believes that the increased camaraderie between the group has also resulted in a better sound.

"I think it is so crucial that we understand each other," she says. "It almost comes to a point where we are all of a single mind. Which I think is necessary to make the group sound really good and make a song as perfect as it possibly can be."

Both she and Tan believe that the addition of Lee, who also acts in popular TV show *Sayang, Sayang*, was integral to improving their sound, with Khoo noting that he challenged them to do more complex vocal arrangements.

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Vocaluptuous' Simone Khoo

"I joined three years ago," says Lee, who had been a graphic designer for 14 years before a "midlife crisis" prompted him to go into music. "I have always loved a cappella music and I always wanted

to arrange stuff for a group that could handle this kind of sound." While he is modest about the skills he has brought to the group, he thinks that he "made them more aware of their vocal instruments, and exposed them to more technical sides of music. Sam (Kan) couldn't read notes before, and now he is starting to do so".

One song that Mr Lee is particularly proud of is Christmas Island. "My favourite song from our holiday repertoire is Christmas Island. I love it!" he enthuses.

"The *Dimsum Dollies* introduced me to the song. It is about spending Christmas in the tropics. It's really a result of a spurt of inspiration, with voices sounding like ukuleles and sliding guitars."

For Lee, the Christmas season is particularly suited to a cappella.

"It started in church and then extended to non-secular songs," he says. "Also, it is pretty related to carolling." Tan agrees, saying "when it comes to Christmas, people are looking forward to hearing familiar tunes. I think it's about this whole idea of being able to sing along and recognise. Carolling, like a cappella, has an element of familiarity. However, we want to bring something new, something surprising, something they don't expect."

"For example, we were singing a traditional *Silent Night*, and we could tell the audience kind of lost interest half-way through, so we decided to do something different with it. We gave it a calypso feel and combined with a popular song called *Stand by Me*. In the end, it was very warmly received."

Vocaluptuous' new album, *Notes from an Island*, captures another aspect of Christmas: that of giving. Last year, they raised \$100,000 in profits from album sales to benefit the Society of the Physically Disabled.

"This year, because of the recession, we have lowered our target to \$50,000," says Lee. "We are trying to raise money for the Kidz Horizon Appeal. It is a subsidiary of the KK hospital, which provides medicine and treatment for terminally ill kids."

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