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PERFORMING ON A  
STAGE WHERE  
STARS  
PERFORM

HOW FAME PRODUCTIONS  
CREATES OPPORTUNITIES  
OF A LIFETIME

by Lisa Gibbs, EdD

Imagine your show choir is attending a competition, say, in Orlando, or Chicago, or Branson, Missouri. You may be accustomed to performing in a university or high school theatre or auditorium. This time, though, you are performing at Hard Rock Live! in Orlando, or the Harris Theater in Chicago, or the Encore Theatre in Branson. You are attending a FAME Productions event.



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FAME Productions, created by Bert Johnson and Joel Biggs, hosted its first Show Choir Competition in Branson nearly 30 years ago. They wanted to produce a show choir event at state-of-the-art theaters in the “live music capital of the world.” By 2000, FAME was producing competitions in four more major cities: Orlando, New York, and Los Angeles, and today they continue to produce national and international competitions at professional venues. I interviewed Bert Johnson to learn more.

**Gibbs:** What is your background in choir and show choir?

**Johnson:** I began singing in our church choir at an early age before my voice changed. In high school I sang in several choirs at school including show choir.

Yes—even in the early ‘80s! I made All-State choir all three years I auditioned. I went to Eastern Arizona College (EAC) in Thatcher, Arizona my freshman year and sang in two choirs there as well. One of them was a show choir. In addition to singing, I accompanied the Beautyshop Quartet at EAC. Dr. David Lunt was the director at EAC and was known statewide for his talent and ability to bring students together. His first semester there, he had 16 students. By the 3rd semester, the program had grown to over 180. I learned a lot from Dr. Lunt that included a passion for music and an appreciation for the aesthetic feeling one can get when joined with other voices to create a body of work that unifies and entertains.

**Gibbs:** I know that feeling! My high school choir went to a big competition

in Orlando in 1984. I remember our mixed choir coming in second to a performing arts high school—that was big for a public school from Huntsville, Alabama! We sang “O Magnum, Mysterium” and I can still feel how zoned in we were with the director in that performance.

How did you and Joel Biggs meet and why did you decide to start a show choir competition?

**Johnson:** I met Joel Biggs at church and we became friends. At the time I was working at a music store teaching piano and managing the sheet music and lesson departments. He asked me to come work for him and I made the career change. We created a festival in Branson in 1995 and had several show choirs that participated. Branson was known as the “live music capital of the world” with more than 30 live music shows. At the time, we concluded that Branson would be a perfect location to host a show choir competition. There was an abundance of state-of-the-art theaters with professional lighting and sound. Branson is located in the center of the country and is fairly easy to get to. There were plenty of professional musicians that could provide feedback to participating groups. We produced the first Show Choir Cup in 1996. At first, the competitions were fairly small, but our reputation began to grow and so did the Branson event. The largest event we produced in Branson consisted of 26 mixed groups performing on two different stages, then taking the top six from each theater competing in a semi-finals event before narrowing it down to the Finals with six groups. Those top six groups performed three times at that event.

In the early 2000s we branched out with competitions in New York, Orlando, Chicago, and Los Angeles. We produced the first-ever international show choir competition in London in the West End.

**Gibbs:** It must have been very exciting to perform on a stage in London's West End. It's like performing on Broadway! Tell us more about what you and Joel have built over the years.

**Johnson:** As pioneers in the show choir industry, we created the first online adjudication system, which can be found at <https://www.ejudicator.com/>. This system allows judges to concentrate on the performance rather than the score sheet. The system is available for local competitions to use as well.

In 2011 we produced the Show Choir National Competition Series (SCNCS) which allowed groups to qualify at a regional event and then advance to the Show Choir National Finals (SCNF). The first SCNF took place in Indianapolis, then in subsequent years moved to Chicago. Several years ago we returned it to Branson where the Show Choir Cup got its start.

At the same time, we began the ASPIRE AWARDS which recognized the top directors, choreographers, arrangers, etc. throughout the competition. It was the first national recognition program created to honor those who work tirelessly and receive little to no applause for their efforts.

**Gibbs:** I'm so excited that you are recognizing the people who do the behind-the-scenes work for show choir. You are right—they do work hard and deserve to be honored.

Describe what it means to produce an event. Think of explaining it to a person coming from a background of being the person onstage having no idea what it takes to help people look and sound their best while onstage.



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**Johnson:** Producing an event requires a lot of moving pieces to create a seamless experience for the participant as well as the audience. Unlike a local high school competition hosted in a school theater or gymnasium with a host of volunteer staff made up of the host school's students, parents, and others, a national event is produced with a minimum number of staff. We rely on the professional ability of the theater's tech crews to produce state-of-the-art lighting and sound, as well as a crew of experienced professionals to escort groups, ensure the adjudication process is fair, unbiased, and accurate, as well as creating a day that is not only competitive but also entertaining for all participants and audience members. We like to roll out the red carpet beginning first with the venue, then on to producing a festival/competition that our participants will remember for a lifetime.

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**Gibbs:** Your website (<https://www.showchoirs.org/about>) states “FAME is committed to providing the very best competition production on professional stages in state-of-the-art venues.” Will you expand on that?

**Johnson:** There's a big difference between performing on stage at a high school auditorium or gymnasium, or in a hotel ballroom versus performing at a venue like the Hard Rock Live!, Genesee Theater, Jazz at Lincoln Center, or the Orpheum in Los Angeles. From our very first year, our goal has been to give the student a chance to perform on a stage where the stars perform. For a show choir that has practiced all year to create a show to compete at the highest level, it's only fitting that the best venue is selected for that show to be performed. It may mean that our events may cost a bit more, but we believe the cost justifies the experience.

**Gibbs:** How did you choose your venues and how have you built/kept up relationships with those venues over the years?

**Johnson:** Venues are selected based on the ability to accommodate our event. That includes stage size, audience capacity, backstage storage, lighting, sound, dressing rooms, etc. We have maintained relationships with some of the top performing arts centers across the country over the years.

**Gibbs:** Do you bring in your own production crew?

**Johnson:** Sometimes we use our own production crews, but mostly rely on the theater techs for lighting and sound. It can be a bit difficult with union halls, but we have been able to work with unions to allow our student stage crew to handle their own stage setups as it's part of the adjudication process.

**Gibbs:** You mentioned you recently went to Normandy, France for an event. Will you tell us what that was?

**Johnson:** FAME Productions is one of three companies under the Sound Education Programs umbrella, <https://www.soundep.com/>. The other companies are Historic Productions and Forte Productions. Historic Productions primarily produces events around historic dates. Recently we completed a production of the 80th Anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, France with ceremonies, performances, and a parade in Sainte-Mere-Eglise honoring the Greatest Generation. Other events include the Pearl Harbor Memorial Parade, the Vietnam Memorial Parade, the Parade of Heros on Veterans Day in Washington, D.C. and others. Show choirs are welcome to participate in any of these events as well. Forte Productions produces the National Orchestra Cup at Lincoln Center and the President's Cup in Washington, D.C. for Concert Bands.

I took piano and learned violin at an early age, but really enjoyed singing in choir during high school and college.

**Gibbs:** Ah, so you and Joel have expanded your knowledge and expertise of producing show choir events to include historic events and concert band events, creating more memorable experiences for people.

I believe the places where we found the most joy as children are where we will thrive as adults. Where did you find happiness as a child?

**Johnson:** I grew up with music in my household. My father never had any formal training as a vocalist, was self-taught and was always in high demand to sing at church, funerals, and other public events. Every morning I would wake up to him singing as he walked down the hallway in our home. I took piano and learned violin at an early age, but really enjoyed singing in choir during high school and college. I began

working at a music store teaching piano shortly after I got married. Eventually, it led to FAME. I've worked here for 30 years now.

**Gibbs:** What a lovely memory to have, hearing your father sing as you wake up in the mornings! Thank you, Bert, for sharing your experiences with me and the readers of *Productions* magazine!

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** *Productions* staff writer Lisa Gibbs earned her Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration in 2018. She is an advocate for arts, particularly dance, in education and for increasing the financial well-being of artists through financial education.



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