

The George Michael Singers

Formed 18 months ago, The George Michael Singers are exactly what it says on the tin. Composed of backing vocalists Shirley Lewis, Jo Garland and Jay Henry, as well as musical director Steve Sidwell, these former colleagues of the Wham! great are heading out on the road with an exuberant and emotional celebration of their one-time boss. "The uniqueness of this show is its authenticity," says Garland, "and audiences will feel and see the love that we have for him. It's magical."

Obviously you're going on tour playing George Michael songs, and you're all former backing singers to him. That's pretty unique!

Jo: "There's nothing out there like this. The whole idea was really organic, we didn't plan for this to happen. Myself and Shirley were on tour, and we were talking about George and all the memories, because we've all got our own unique relationship with him as well as him just being our boss. The impact that he had on our lives is all very different. So we were sharing these stories and then Shirley said, 'Oh my God, there are so many people out there that would love to listen to these!' And that's how the show started."

So you talk about your memories of George, as well as playing his songs?

Shirley: "Yes, we talk about how we met him, how we recorded with him, just personal stories of being around George, being in the studio, being on tour. So it's like An Evening With, and then the stories segue into the songs."

Together, the three of you seem to have worked with George on virtually everything he ever did?

Shirley: "Yes, we all worked with George for about 25 years. We've all been on tour with him, we've all recorded with him. Myself and Jo are on all of those big hits – Father Figure, Freedom, Spinning The Wheel... Myself and Jay have done a lot of the tours, like the Cover To Cover tour, Symphonica, 25 Live and we've done loads of TV with George like the famous MTV Unplugged. We've been the constant – the George Michael sound is us, basically."

All of you were friends as well as colleagues with George. What was he like as a person?

Shirley: "He was so kind. Obviously he did loads of work for charity, but he was generous to us as well. For me personally, I was going through an awful time in my life. I was married to Luke Goss from Bros and they'd had a massive downfall and we were in real trouble with our mortgage and other things. As I was talking to George I just broke into tears, and I had to tell him we'd had to sell our jewelry because we didn't have any money and he said, 'Why didn't you tell me!?' Cut a long story short, the next day he transferred £50,000 into my account. I was like, 'Oh my God, I don't even need that much!' and he said, 'I just don't want you to worry about anything, just take it.'"

What was your first work with George?

Shirley: "The first show that I ever did was the Wham! final at Wembley Stadium. Then after that, he said he was doing a solo record and was I around to do some vocals for him? The track was Father Figure and I was like, 'Okay, that's not just a track, that's like an iconic song!' so we recorded that together. I was the only singer that he used on the Faith album, so that was a big honour for me."

Jo: "I was a big Wham! fan – I had posters all over my wall, but I fancied Andrew Ridgeley, though I never told George that! [Laughs]. But my first work with George was singing on the whole of the Older album."

When you sing George's songs, are there particular tracks that get a specific reaction from the audience?

Shirley: "When we do You Have Been Loved, everyone is in tears. Then we get a huge reaction to Freedom 90, and the Wham songs we do."

Jo: "The importance of the show is that we take the audience on a journey. We start in a very emotional way, and then it's all high energy. We're taking them on an up and down journey... it's a bit of a rollercoaster."

Shirley: "As Jo always says, bring your dancing shoes, but you'd better bring your tissues as well!"

It must be very emotional being on stage, singing those songs, but not having George with you?

Shirley: "When we're together, there is a spiritual energy, it's like we conjure up George's spirit in some way. We're still very connected with him, and I really feel like the audience gets it, because they're mesmerised when we're together, and I think that it gives them a sense of George. They feel connected to us and through us they're connected to him."

What can audiences expect who have never been to one of your shows?

Shirley: "It's a celebration of George. This is not a tribute band – we're a part of these songs, we're the people that helped create the sound of these songs. We really want people to listen to the lyrics. With us, you're not being dazzled by someone dressed like George, prancing around the stage trying to be George Michael, so you can just sit back and listen to those beautiful words. And the sound that you get will be reminiscent of George. That's the thing – it's a feeling of George, like he's back with you, and that's what we hope that the audience takes away with them."