

While We're Here We Should Sing: The Why Nots' Memoir of Sisterhood and Song

The Why Nots



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The year was 1970. The city of Riverside, once home to the nation's citrus industry and still spotted with orange groves, had 150,000 residents. The Beatles' "Let It Be" and Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water" were in the Top Ten. Stories about the growing "women's movement" filled newspapers and magazines. Pat Mainardi put forth a proposal for "wages for housework." Bella Abzug was elected to Congress. Feminists staged sit-ins at Ladies Home Journal and Newsweek. Robin Morgan published Sisterhood Is Powerful.

We were women ranging in age from 30 to 45, hailing from Ireland, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and California, with husbands at work and children in school. Two of us--Rachel and Marge--were born in Riverside. Others moved here with our husbands for jobs at UCR, RCC, and March Air Force Base.

With varied musical skills and backgrounds, each of us decided to take guitar lessons from Keith Chalmers, a masterful teacher who lived in Riverside. Some of us had known each other from our churches, clubs, or our children's schools, but it was in those sessions with Keith that we came together as the Why Nots.

When the Why Nots began making music together, we were busy as mothers, wives, volunteers, career women, and, now, musicians. That year, Keith got us our first "gig"--singing on the mall in downtown Riverside for the City's centennial. It was very fitting that we got our start in downtown Riverside celebrating the city we had all made our home; in many ways, our story is a Riverside story.

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