



The African American Choral Ensemble's spring concert.

# CHOOSING LIFE & SONGS

WATCHING  
THE BEATS

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BY K.D. SELF

On my way home from a recent Saturday Farmer's Market, while walking the B-line trail, I listened as a young mother merrily sang with her three kids. Then, I passed WonderLab's garden where a children's choir harmonized. Adjusting earplugs, I cranked up Lucinda Williams and sang: "Right in Time." At home, I meditated. Do we sing to share stories? Sure. But we also sing—and create art—to shine hopeful light on fearful darkness, to inspire truth, to dance joy, to actively choose life.

Toward the end of the IU semester, Bloomington throbs with art, movie, and musical possibilities. In late April, I entered a filmic time/space warp by stepping into three (free) IU Cinema movies that geographically spanned Britain, India, continental Europe, and Italy. These films shed light on characters' hopes and fears and on life choices. Beyond the introverted, early twentieth-century world of mathematicians, I was transported to sensual extroversion revealed by two modern Italian films.

The beautifully shot 2015 movie *the Man Who Knew Infinity*—featuring Jeremy Irons and Dev Patel—told an intellectual, biographical tale. This film reflected the horror of British colonial racism and classism (bigoted highbrow Brits vs. the uneducated but brilliant S. Ramanujan). Ramanujan's groundbreaking mathematical formulas were not founded on scientific proofs (hence they were disparaged). Instead, these ideas appeared to the impoverished Indian youth miraculously—as "gifts from god." Against all odds (including his own early demise from TB), Ramanujan had hope. He passionately chose to reveal the artful beauty of his formulaic treasures.

Also at IU Cinema, Indiana University's Department of French and Italian sponsored their eighth annual Italian film festival. I was privileged to view two of four Roberto Andò films. Director Andò's 2004 movie *Sotto falso nome* (*Strange Crime*) was a cryptic journey into the sensual exchange between an adulterous middle-aged writer and a young (also deceitful) lover. Complications arose from each character's choices for secrets and lies. Andò's more widely known (and more polished) 2013 film *Viva la libertà!* (*Long Live Freedom!*)

also ruminated ironically on secrets, lies, and love—framed within the corrupt world of Italian politics. The ability of a politician's (perhaps insane) brother to (secretly) replace him and turn skeptical masses into supporters by using lyrical speech reflected the power of words. Not only did this film evoke Orwellian (and Trump) images of political doublespeak, it also raised questions about the consequences for individual choice. With both films, Andò seems concerned with how his characters self-identified as public personalities and whether each character's personal and public decisions yielded hope (the answer for many characters in both films was 'maybe not').

Switching from film back to music, on April 29 at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, I witnessed the engaging IU African American Choral Ensemble as they performed a range of African, inspirational, and gospel songs. Director/conductor Raymond Wise explained this was a collective art experience; lively audience interaction was encouraged. Fun improvisations also erupted. The AACE's set list included the classic

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spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" (with Alonza Lawrence providing a moving solo) and a rousing rendition of Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror." After intermission, the AACE performed mostly gospel songs but with a twist. Dr. Wise explained gospel is becoming globalized; last year, the ensemble traveled to Germany. And, gospel music has become very popular in Japan (the AACE sang gospels in both Japanese and Italian). This ensemble demonstrated that regardless of historic origin or the language being sung—whether songs are written in response to slavery or other strife; whether they are sung in English or Italian—the act of singing can provide joy, inspiration, and power for both singer and audience. Fittingly, the AACE closed their night with two heart-touching gospels: "Healing" and "Don't Give Up."

In an era when 100 days feels like 100 years, the AACE brought inspirational perspective. Despite personal, social, or political difficulty, let us choose hopeful life songs—and never give up.

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