

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Passions

## Got a complaint? Sing it out

Maybe it's the weather or the selfish drivers - B.C. has the highest concentration of 'complaint choirs' in the country

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Want a really good whine? Head west.

From Vancouver's hatred of the Canada Line, selfish drivers and abysmal [health care](#) (and rain) to Gabriola Island's three-year wait for a hip replacement, excessive water use by visitors and clear-cut logging (and rain), B.C. is at the vanguard of kvetching – in choral harmony.

Complaints choirs, which set life's little irritants to music – “Real food is expensive, junk food is cheap/ The jokes are not funny, don't e-mail them to me” – were created by two Finnish artists and first adopted in 2005 by a choir in England, that notoriously whinging nation.

Misery must really love company. From Birmingham, the idea gained global traction fast, popping up in Japan, [Hong Kong](#), Singapore, the U.S. and Australia. But with four choirs, B.C. reportedly has the highest concentration.

So what is there to gripe about in Port Coquitlam, the latest addition? Short cuts that everybody takes, wearing helmets, too many cars, garbage being picked up by “organized” bears, taxes and the HST. And rain, of course.

But it's less short-tempered than long on laughs, suggests Andrew Carroll, who wrote the grouchy jingle sung by a 15-strong choir at the local United Church. “We've never taken ourselves too seriously on the West Coast,” he says.

“‘Complaints' is a misnomer: This is a way of pointing out things in your community that you're not happy with, but it's done in a tongue-in-cheek way.”

Port Coquitlam residents were invited to send in their beefs, which were then sifted for the nine-minute song. “It's an opportunity to open up and make it a community thing,” says Judy Johnson, another chorister. “It wasn't to do anything churchy.”

Complaints choirs, in her mind, expose the universality of human disgruntlement. “We realized that we're not so different from people in Copenhagen or Tokyo or Mumbai.”

Malcolm Island's Sointula completes the B.C. grumble map – a former Finnish settlement, naturally, off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. It was set up as a utopia in the early 1900s, but is apparently not quite so ideal today.

Its amusingly parochial concerns include noisy eagles, windowless offices, short summers and ferries that show up promptly when people are running late. Oh, and rain.

There's a great deal of evidence to support the positive effect of music and how it affects your brainwaves. What's more, airing grievances musically could be therapeutic, according to Vancouver-based community psychiatrist Ursula Gutteridge. "Ever since Freud's daughter, Anna, described 'ventilation' or 'venting' as a defence mechanism – as a way humans cope with life – society has realized the importance of complaining and having those complaints validated."

Valid or not, the Vancouver complaints choir's lyrics take a more serious tone ("Liberal government took a big pay raise/ Don't seem to notice all the people on the street" – written "in about 90 minutes over a few beers," according to its website). It is currently recruiting for a new session.

"We are experiencing a big shift in the way government and political bodies have been slashing at culture ... so that people start feeling the pressure of this very irresponsible agenda," says the Vancouver group's artistic director, Giorgio Magnanensi.

"There are a lot of people wanting to complain in a constructive way, and this seems like a creative way to deliver a message, to regain ownership of our voice in saying what we like or dislike."

He compares the idea to the tradition of workers' choirs going back to 19th-century Europe.

And it makes sense it was picked up enthusiastically in B.C., as there were so many choirs in the region already.

But Elizabeth Dunn, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of [British Columbia](#), is surprised to hear the province is such a vineyard of sour grapes. "I think Vancouverites tend to take a pretty positive view of things," she says, citing the local mantra that when it is raining in the city, it's probably snowing on the mountains. "We're incredibly lucky to live here."

Generally, she adds, complaining can be counterproductive to contentment. She cautions against the moan-along as therapy for winter blues: "I think you might get more happiness from forming a gratitude choir."

But where would be the fun in that?

*Lucy Hyslop is a Vancouver-based journalist.*

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