

# Shall We Sing?

U.S.A., 2007, 56min., color

## Synopsis:

“Shall We Sing?” is the story of a choral group, as well as the story of Japanese businessmen living far away from their home country. The New York Men’s Choir is composed of fifty Japanese men currently living in New York. Most of them are businessmen assigned to work in the U.S. office of a Japanese company for several years; while some of the men are now retired and living in the U.S. permanently; and a few others are students.



From a man working for a small firm to an elite businessman working for a major corporation, from a bachelor to a married father, from a retired senior to a high school teenager, the members all come from different backgrounds and just happen to find themselves living in New York at the same time and singing in the same choral group.

The choir’s year begins in January with a meeting to select the program of songs they will perform throughout the upcoming year. In addition to weekly rehearsals, the choir performs charity concerts along the way as preparation for their annual concert at the end of the year.

Having been relocated by their Japanese companies, many of the bachelors find themselves thrown into the middle of big city with no family or friends. Likewise, many of the married members had to leave their families behind in Japan. The choir thus becomes a treasured place where they can meet other people who are experiencing similar feelings of alienation and loneliness.



In contrast, some members have lived in the U.S. for decades. They, too, ventured to the U.S. for business in the days of their youth, and now that they are now in their 60s and 70s, they often think back to childhood memories in their Japanese hometowns. The atmosphere of the choir allows the older members a means to transport themselves back to Japan – if only for a moment. Over the course of weekly rehearsals followed by talks and drinks, overnight training camps, and volunteer concerts, the members gradually create not only a unique vocal harmony, but also a mutual friendship and bond over the course of the year.

However, because each businessman must move at his company’s instruction, the group never knows who may be transferred away from New York at a moment’s notice. Experiencing frequent farewells, the choir is never allowed to stay the same for long.



“Shall We Sing?” is an intimate look at Japanese men who meet each other in the middle of a large and foreign city, bound by their love for singing and their love for their home country.

## **Director's Statement:**

What kind of people do you imagine when you hear the words, "Japanese businessmen"? Are they diligent and hardworking Asians? Or, are they weary middle-aged men bereft of energy? Or, are they smart and accomplished businessmen striding confidently along a crowded street in a big city?

About five years ago, I happened to learn about the New York Men's Choir, a group of fifty Japanese men living in New York. One of my father's old friends invited me to their concert where I was instantly charmed with their performance. Speaking more precisely, what attracted me was not the technical quality of their singing, but it was their personalities. They did not conform to any of the images of businessmen I had in my mind. They looked just like young boys at a school performance. They were excited and nervous at the same time. They seemed proud of themselves while on stage singing together in front of hundreds of people. I could tell that the atmosphere they share in the choir is something really special: very intimate, comfortable, and enjoyable.

I started to follow them in the fall of 2002. Over the course of one and a half years of filming, I gradually gained a sense of what life is like for them in a major city in a foreign country. Most of the businessmen have left their families behind in Japan and currently live alone. It's hard for them to make new friends given their daily routine which can seem like little more than a constant back and forth between office and apartment. The choir provides a place for them to forget their work and spend some relaxing and pleasant time together with comrades. For elder members who have been living in the US a longtime, the choir allows them to transport themselves back to Japan even if only for a brief moment.

Originally coming from all different parts of Japan, these men happened to find one another far away from their native country. Because businessmen are transferred at their company's direction anytime, members continually come and go. The group never stays the same. Ironically, because the time they can share together is limited, the bond that forms between them is strong. It was a unique experience to see people from different companies, from different job levels, and from different age groups, establishing such a close and warm relationship with each other. Seeing a teenage member having a lot of fun hanging around with middle-aged and much older members even gave me a kind of hope for the future of Japanese society which has suffered from so many intergenerational problems.

The members of the New York Men's Choir are solely connected by their love for singing and love for their group. One of the members once said the choir is an oasis for his heart. And I myself found that visiting their rehearsal once a week gave me encouragement to face the next day especially when I had a rough day at my daytime job or was feeling low. Having finished my filming, I now really regret that I can no longer visit them every Tuesday night.

Reina Higashitani

**Director/Producer/Camera: Reina Higashitani**

Based in New York City, Reina Higashitani has produced, directed, photographed, and edited a multitude of video productions. She is currently working as a producer of community and nonprofit video productions for one of America's most successful independent media centers, Downtown Community Television Center. Her first feature length documentary "Shall We Sing?" won the Excellence Award at the Tokyo Video Festival and has been screened at Connecticut Film Festival and Japan Society New York, among others. She is also the associate producer of work-in-progress feature documentary "KUSAMA-Princess of Polka Dots" by Heather Lenz. A scholar of film, Reina is a frequently published film critic, writing reviews and essays for newspapers and magazines including Marie Claire Japan. In addition, she is often involved in programming film festivals and translating works Japanese films for US distribution. Reina received her Master's Degree in Cinema Studies from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

**Credits:**

Director/Producer/Camera: Reina Higashitani  
Editor: Naomi Mizoguchi  
Additional Editors: Edward Chin, Reina Higashitani  
Music Arrangement: Lei Liang  
Narrator: Motofumi Tohda  
Title Design: Jennifer Long  
Subtitles: Mike Shannon

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