

I'm turning 59, the age my sister died. So I'm making my time count

Lucy Cavendish on how the joy of joining a band has nudged away her fear of death



Lucy Cavendish and her sister, Nicola
JUDE EDGINGTON, COURTESY OF LUCY CAVENDISH

Lucy Cavendish

Thursday October 23 2025, 11:00pm, The Times

This December I'm turning 59, the age my sister Nicola died in 2022, far too young and very unexpectedly. Although there was initially no definitive cause of death — apparently that is quite common and it is chalked down to “sudden adult death syndrome” — eventually the coroner said she died from viral pneumonia exacerbated by Covid.

We still don't understand what happened. It was July 19, the hottest day of that year, when temperatures soared higher than 40C and there was a spike in deaths. The heat was probably an extra deadly factor.

A week later I went on a long-booked holiday to Greece. There is a madness that happens when someone dies. I look back on that now and think, should I have gone on that holiday? But it felt quite necessary. I was with my teenage daughter and a friend and I spent most of the days crying. But what I really remember is diving into the sea and swimming as if my life depended on it. With every breath and every stroke I told myself that this was something my sister would never be able to do again and that I must be determined to lead the best life I possibly could. Anything short of that would be a travesty and an insult to her memory.

She was such a loving person who made time for everyone and was unfailingly generous in her care for her family and friends. I am terrified I will forget the sound of her infectious laugh.

Ever since then I've tried to live my life to the fullest. I haven't always succeeded. But throughout the grief and the tears I have tried to motivate myself not only by listening to what I know she would say to me — “Come on, Luce, you can do it” — but by challenging myself to do things I wouldn't usually do but really want to.

And now, as I'm about to turn 59, I can feel a fear seeping through me. My sister had no idea that that was the last year of her life. I keep thinking, what if this is the last year of mine? When my children ask me what I would like to do for my 60th, I find myself thinking I won't be here.

This is not uncommon. As a therapist I know perfectly well that people suffer from thanatophobia — a fear of death. I have had clients whose fathers have died of heart attacks in their early sixties and they have come to me convinced that this is when they will die too. Grief works in mysterious ways.



Nicola, left, and Lucy as children

I am acutely aware that my sister's premature death has galvanised me to do things that I would never have done before, one of which — and it has been utterly life-changing — has been to join a band.

It happened about two years ago. I was and still am a member of a club for midlife singles called the Otto Connection. The idea behind this club is that it isn't about dating, it's about like-minded people meeting up and doing interesting things. At some point one member suggested getting together to play some music; we would meet at a rehearsal studio, just have a jam and see what happened. At first I decided I wouldn't do it. But I kept finding myself pulled back to wanting to go along and do some singing.

I used to sing — I was a chorister at the local church and sang in the Royal Albert Hall with my choir when I was ten years old. As a teen I was a singer in a band covering Beatles and Rolling Stones songs. Apart from a bit of karaoke, I hadn't really performed for more than 30 years. But one day, repeating my mantra of trying new things, I decided to go to a band rehearsal.

I walked into the studio feeling very nervous. The band was quite formed already — lead, bass and rhythm guitar, drummer, and a rotating group of singers. I felt rather out of place because everyone else had been practising together for a few months. But I was handed some sheet music and off we went.

We played all sorts of music: the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Fleetwood Mac, a bit of T Rex, Van Morrison. There were songs that we tried and then rejected because we weren't very good at them. People came and went as the band formed and reformed. We rehearsed every couple of weeks until the playlist was eventually whittled down to 12 songs. We ended up with four singers, and we take turns as leads. As time went on, I began to write the harmonies.

At first I didn't really tell anyone. I sat at home, played the tracks and then sang along and re-recorded them myself. Then I started sharing that with the singers and asking them what they thought. Soon I got the soubriquet of “Choir Mistress”.

Over time I began to realise, despite feeling slightly out of my depth at first, that I absolutely loved it. It's not just the singing — I love messing around with the harmonies, singing in the car with purpose, practising the high parts and low parts — it's that I just love being in a band. We have the best time. Do we get on all the time? Of course we don't. We have “artistic differences”. We get things wrong sometimes. But we get things right a lot of the time too, and the sense of companionship and belonging I feel with my bandmates is absolutely joyous and life affirming. I can feel a fear of early death being nudged out the way by this new passion.

I've also realised how much I love performing and being on stage. I was like that as a child but was constantly told I was a show-off. So for years and years I thought that was something I shouldn't do. But now I am having a ball. I have realised that if you go on stage and dance and sing your heart out and wave your hands in the air, everybody has a great time. It feels good to do something completely new — and rediscover an old sense of self — at this age. Nicola would approve.

Our first performance was last December at Dingwalls, the celebrated music venue in Camden, north London. There were more than 300 people there. We were all nervous but we got out on stage and had an absolute blast. Everyone was dancing and singing — it was completely electrifying. I will never forget at some point turning around and looking at the band and the singers, all of them deliriously happy.

Next week we are playing to another 200 people at the Half Moon, the live-music venue in Putney, southwest London. That gig sold out last week and we even have a waiting list. We've added new songs to our repertoire; I have done the musical arrangements. I cannot tell you how excited I am to be back on stage, singing, dancing and looking out over a crowd of people enjoying themselves.

My children and other members of my extended family came to our first gig — even my 91-year-old mother. I found her in the crowd, sitting down to one side. It made me want to cry seeing her there, smiling and singing along.

Did I feel my sister was there watching me? No, I didn't. But what I do know is that she would have been absolutely thrilled to see me up on the stage. She would say that phrase I heard her tell me so many times: “Come on, Luce, you can do this.” And I would thank her for somehow giving me the courage to stand up there and show off again.