

# The Spookagenda

An inexplicable Australian cult has swept UK festivals the past few years, involving looming men in black and hats. **Katie Rose** investigates the Spooky Men's Chorale.

**T**he fire exit at the back is full of Spooky Men. I am standing at the back of a church hall at Sidmouth Folk Week packed full of expectant, excited children of all ages awaiting our imminent descent into deep, dark tones and beefy bass chords. Posters have appeared throughout the streets with slogans such as "Spooky Men Hit All Time Low," alerting us to the presence of the black-clad Chorale who now emerge from the fire exit and congregate onstage sporting an eclectic range of hats and facial hair. "We are the Spooky Men, we dream of mastodons..."

So who are the Spooky Men and from whence did they come? The legend of the Spooky Men is shrouded in mystery, Spooky Man Robin Janus tells me. "The Spooky Men has got a really long history, it started before any of us, it sort of grew up through a legend at first. At first there weren't any spooky men, there was just the legend of the spooky men and then it grew into a black-clad spooky man thing."

The first known sighting of The Spooky Men's Chorale took place at Paddington Uniting Church, Sydney, Australia in August 2001. Spookmeister Stephen Taberner, who combines a prolific passion for choir-leading alongside a solo career as a double bass player, singer and songwriter, writes in his blog that "Basically I called up every guy I knew who could sing and seemed to be a tolerable human

being, taught them three songs, and asked them to show up wearing black and with an interesting hat."

Influenced by the Georgian choral tradition and motivated by the desire to move women to tears with beautiful singing, "the stupidity that followed was inevitable". The original core group of Spooky Men from the Blue Mountains now includes Spooks from across Australia and the UK, enabling them to tour vast swathes of Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Denmark.

The Spooky repertoire, written and directed by Stephen, features original compositions, traditional Georgian songs and singularly spooky arrangements of songs such as Earth, Wind & Fire's *Boogie Wonderland*. Spooky emissions include *Tooled Up* (2004), *Stop Scratching It* (2007), *Urban Sea Shanties* (with Fred Smith, 2009), *Deep* (2009) and *BIG* (2011). Their latest album, *The Spooky Man In History*, features a sprawling range of material including Spooky spoof *Ba'hari Ghibb* (a Sufi-style cover of *Staying Alive* which won the Australian National Folk Festival Bee Gees competition), tender love song *Sweetest Kick* and Georgian songs *Tsimindao* and *Elesa*. Describing the new album's relationship to the 'citadel' of previously successful spooky material such as *The Spooky Theme* and *Dancing Queen*, Stephen says "I feel we successfully busted out of our citadel, crossed a bit of jungle and formed a new outpost."

Musical Director Stephen Taberner second left



Photo: Judith Burrows

**A**s a musical director, Stephen describes himself as being "fairly ruthless in terms of what I'm looking for, and going for it," but does respond to "provocations" by the Spooky Men, such as the idea of Ba'hari Ghibb as a thirteenth century prophet suggested by one of the men. "I don't think anything that's really worth knowing creatively exists in a vacuum, it exists in a world where provocations come and be a part of it."

The process of becoming a Spooky Man can be startling, UK musician, conductor and teacher James Sills tells me as we follow the crowd of blokes of all genders spilling out of the *Sing Like A Bloke* workshop towards the town centre where they will sing together in glorious harmony before hitting the beach. "Once you're a Spooky Man you're always a Spooky Man," he says. "I think there currently are 38 active Spooks who can be called upon for action at any time." This can involve being summonsed to learn 40 songs via Dropbox in just a matter of days before a gig. The Spookmeister states that the Spooks are all "purposefully chosen" not just for their singing or theatrical ability. "The main thing is that they actually have a geniality and relaxedness about themselves," Neville Ross, one of the original Blue Mountain Spooky Men, confirms. "We're just ordinary men with partners, sheds and jobs." They include teachers, designers, auditors, touring musicians and choir leaders.

One essential requirement for The Spooky Men is to not take themselves seriously. "It allows you to be a man and expose the whole nature of manliness including the follies and vanities and stupidities that women have known about forever," UK Spook Chris Samuels comments. According to Facebook demographics, the Spooky fanbase is 64 percent female. Stephen Taberner surmises that this may be because the mocking of masculinity inherent in songs such as *Don't Stand Between A Man And His Tool* could be threatening to alpha males susceptible to the "epic folly" of taking themselves too seriously.

Reflecting that there has been a "narrowing sense of what it is to be a man," Stephen suggests that "the man love that's expressed between the men in the Spooky Men is of the old-fashioned nature where you might have your arm around someone and I reckon that's threatening and it shouldn't be threatening." He describes the stunned reaction from an assembly of children at a very low socio-economic school in Australia, when he took hold of



Photo: Judith Burrows

Ryan Morrison's hand during the performance. "There's almost like a gasp from the audience. 'There are two men who are not gay holding each other's hands – how is it possible?' I felt like it was the best work that we'd ever done."

Certainly what touches me most about the Spooky Men is the sense of camaraderie between them, which arises from the fact that they are men who sing together. Chris Samuel, whose article *Why Don't Men Join Choirs?* was featured in *The Guardian*, says he spends increasing amounts of time convincing men that singing is a manly activity. As well as being a Spooky Man, he leads a men's choir in Ashton Keynes – The AK47s – and speaks movingly of the way both groups dealt with a bereavement this year, singing tributes together. "Men don't usually have that arena to share grief like that, its very much about bottling it up and not showing emotions, but singing lets you do that in a way that we don't normally have access to."

The Spooky Men may be able to hold hands and express their feelings, but as a song on the new album declares, they are clear that *We Are Not A Men's Group*. They are men who enjoy singing homages to their body parts (*Foot, Eyebrow*), chants to frighten off neighbouring tribes (*We're Here*), songs about being part of committees and societies (*Universal Club Song*) and hymns to important domestic appliances (*The Thing*). They are men who will burst into the local pub, singing Georgian Drinking Songs and insist that everyone is drinking, singing or dancing. At the *Sing Like A Bloke* workshops they model a creative, daring, playfulness that invites blokes of all genders to sing from a strong, confident, unapologetic place.

"We're sort of implicitly suggesting that both to sing and to hear singing is transformative in some kind of way, that it

exposes you to a new way of seeing, it makes you feel something. So you have to be both gleeful and exultant and also cautious about what it is that you make people feel or what it is that you make them laugh about, because it's part of an imagined trajectory for transformation," Stephen explains. As such, the theatrical spectacle of the Spooky Men is both inclusive and subversive – by the end of the encore of their final UK tour performance at the Union Chapel, everyone is singing and dancing to the tune of *Dance Me To The End of Love*.

**O**ne important discovery of the Spooky Men's recent tour of the UK, which featured an additional Viking Quest to Denmark, was that the Spooky Men are 'translatable'. The generous and enthusiastic Danish response to Spookiness with comments such as "you are not like the other singings" was a "complete delight," Stephen says. Following this success, they will be touring Australia and New Zealand in 2014 – "we'll try to get back to Denmark as soon as we can." Despite a deep commitment to the three-part harmonies, five-note scales and declamatory style (aka "pointless grandeur") of Georgian choral music, there are no plans to visit Georgia.

Dana Fergusson, who sang in the very first Spooky Man gig then disappeared and reappeared for the latest tour, points out that having now performed the songs *Foot* and *Eyebrow*, there is scope for future development. "We do have quite a few other body parts that we feel passionate about and that we want to sing about and to let everyone know how important they are to us."

Neville Ross defines the archetype of the Spooky Man as a combination of the "olden day chieftain with modern bewilderment". Spookiness appears to be an

existential state where everything is subject to comic enquiry and where a man is an accidental hero, redeemed by his ability to perceive his own ridiculousness and sing in close harmony. Ultimately, as Robin Janus who was instrumental in assembling *The Spooky Men In History* album cover, explains, it's indefinable. "The main thing is you can't really think about what spooky is, it's something that comes from within, it's something that you live. You kinda are or aren't and you can't really say what it is. You just have to live it."

Standing in a *Sing Like A Bloke* workshop, having been invited to visualise myself as an ancient chieftain and sing from the centre of my chest, I begin to get a sense of what it's like to be a Spooky Man. "Everybody seems to enjoy the sense of empowerment and embodiment of accessing these archetypes," Stephen says. He cites Obelix, Brian Blessed and individual Maori, Polynesian and Latvian men he has met on his travels as examples of Spooky Men. "They're very straightforward, they're very strong, they love to eat, they love to laugh." He also speaks of Surrealists and clowns like Harpo Marx and Charlie Chaplin as important influences. "Many male situations develop as an arm wrestle between yes and no. The Surrealist offers an absurd alternative to that which invites everyone to laugh at him and thereby to be unified."

The ability of the Spooky Men to be inclusive of those around them, to validate the 'inner spook' in everyone and give them permission to both express and laugh at themselves seems to be at the core of their magic. As one female bloke in the crowd at Sidmouth Folk Week describes it, "It just puts you in a certain nice singing mood afterwards, so you kind of feel like a spooky man."