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## THE SPOOKY MEN'S CHORALE

Frances Brown Academic editor Maidens

On their second tour of Britain's more out-of-the-way venues, the Spooky Men's Chorale returned to Castle Douglas and a rapturous welcome. I'd never seen this Australian group before, or heard of them until I stumbled across a flyer for their gig, but I had a hunch they would be good.

Dressed in black, apart from their silly hats, and boasting a variety of ages, shapes and sizes (as did the audience), the Spooky Men looked entertainingly different. But their first song - an unaccompanied ancient Georgian march - made it plain that they can also sing.

There was plenty of banter with the audience and joking about a certain type of man's difficulties with emotions where anything other than spanners are concerned. However, while superficially a comedy act, the Spooky Men are also fine close harmony singers, their tuning, timing and dynamics impeccable. Alongside other examples of Georgian table singing - similar in parts to Russian orthodox music but more robust - they gave us straight a capella ballads (Paul McCartney; a moving rendition of Joni Mitchell's "The Fiddle and the Drum"), celebrations of "boys' things" (sheds, tools stamp collections), a delightful setting of one of Hilaire Belloc's Cautionary Tales for Children and some hilarious spoofs of Queen and Abba, the latter complete with Viking helmets and back-to-back dancing, the former involving cymbals and a loudhailer to send up the bombast of "Flash".

All the songs were ensemble pieces performed under the direction of the energetic MC and conductor, who, despite often having his back to the group or clowning around, never failed to keep it together and in time. Solo spots also gave other members a chance to show off while their comrades hammed it up behind them.

The group also performs its own compositions, in which its political edge becomes more obvious, as in the simple yet eloquent plea to proponents of the war on terror, "Stop scratching it (you're only making it worse)" and in the comment on John Howard's government, "Vote the Bastards Out", with its increasingly frenetic pace and varied repetitions of the phrase.

My husband had begun tittering happily after a few minutes and we agreed that watching relatively little-known acts on hard chairs in remote halls can be more rewarding than craning to see a "legendary" star in an outsize, impersonal venue.

Touring to 5 Aug ([www.spookymen.com.au](http://www.spookymen.com.au))

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