

Spooky, man



By John Shand
March 10, 2006

A cappella gets creepy at the Blue Mountains Music Festival.

I admit it. I have a near-psychopathic hatred of a capella, tormented by smug, smiling singers who, too mean to pay for real musicians to accompany them, commit diabolical acts on unsuspecting songs.

There are exceptions: usually people who are not all teeth, hair, cocktail dresses and Burt Bacharach songs. The Spooky Men's Chorale are nothing like that. There is no chintz, no bling and no kitsch in their routine. Instead this rugby team-size choir of boofy blokes settles for a healthy blend of eccentricity, scariness and laughs.

As with many good ideas, the name came first. Founder Steven Taberner had been listening to men's choirs from Georgia - the one in the former Soviet Union, not the one in the gun belt - and found the bass-heavy swell of masculine voices rather spooky. Armed with the name, he just needed the singers and the music.

Taberner, who has proved himself a high-quality singer and songwriter on his solo CD *Burning Slow*, initially assembled some blokes just as a novelty act for a gig at Paddington's Eastside Church in 2001.

The response was so overwhelming the project immediately had a life of its own and the Spooky Men started to haunt the wider world.

Beneath the zaniness of both lyrics and presentation there is a level of deadly seriousness: only good singers are capable of fulfilling Taberner's nightmare, and they also have to look a bit spooky and be blessed with the right sense of humour.

"Spookiness is really important and some people are lucky," he says. "They just look spooky."

There was one guy who Taberner held up as an example to all the others at a rehearsal as striking just the right look of beaten-down desperation while singing their idiosyncratic version of Not Pretty Enough.

"I said, 'Do it like Richard does,' " he says. "Subsequently I realised that he actually sang every song like that. That was his natural demeanour."

Not that these blokes work too hard on looking odd - it seems natural for most of them. Add songs including the classic Spooky Theme, Don't Stand Between Man and his Tool and Vote the Bastards Out and demand has soared.

They are regulars at the Woodford and National folk festivals, have played Melbourne three times, and in August all 15 of them fly to Britain to do dates including London and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Not bad for a bunch of amateur singers from the Blue Mountains. There is a sound engineer and a few casual singer-songwriters among them, but ostensibly this is just a regular gaggle of dads and teachers, carpenters and architects. Except they just happen to be a bit spooky.

SPOOKY MEN'S CHORALE

Blue Mountains Music Festival, Katoomba,

March 18-19, 1800 651 322,

\$60-\$145,

www.bmff.org.au

[Subscribe to The SMH and you could win a \\$26,000 holiday to London](#)

More Entertainment

Copyright © 2006. The Sydney Morning Herald.