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These photos show members of the Dustyesky Choir during a rehearsal in Mullumbimby. — AFP photos

## Tsars of the show: Aussie blokes become unlikely Russian folk heroes

The idea of starting a Russian choir in rural Australia began as a vodka-fuelled lark, but five years on a rag-tag bunch of farmers, lawyers and laborers have become unlikely international folk heroes. None of them speaks Russian, only one has ever travelled to Russia, and absolutely no one would mistake their tiny coastal hometown of Mullumbimby for Moscow.

But "Dustyesky" has won over fans from Sydney to Sochi with renditions of traditional Russian folk songs, which they perform at festivals across Australia.

Andrew Swain, a local builder and the choir's director, admitted the all-male group had varying degrees of choral experience. It ranges, he said, from "the guys who can actually sing" to those who "don't have any idea what they're doing—but they're great company". "There's no Russian talent, let's be clear about that," he said. Swain said he offered to set up the 28-strong cult act in 2014 when a friend who runs the town's music festival com-

plained he would love to feature a Russian choir at the event but couldn't afford to fly one in.

"We were drinking vodka and it was late at night, and I said to him, 'mate, we'll just start our own,'" he said. "The next morning we woke up and I thought, I don't really know what I've done here, but I've run choirs before and I think we can do this. "And off we went." The choir's repertoire mixes romantic folk melodies with rousing Soviet Red Army revolutionary classics and Russian Orthodox Church hymns. "The songs kind of sing themselves," said choir member Chris Mallory. "We learnt the songs phonetically, most of us not really having a clue what we're singing."

The act is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Their name, Dustyesky, is a Dostoevsky-inspired merging of "dusty" and "esky"—an Australian brand of insulated coolers often used on construction sites and at barbecues. And although one member introduces their songs in a fake

Russian accent, the choir also has a more serious side. Dustyesky's members gather faithfully every Tuesday at the local veterans' club to practice. It is a ritual they agree has closely bonded the men, many of whom didn't know one another before they joined.

And the line-up has remained virtually unchanged since its creation, with so many others keen to join there is now a waiting list of about 100 aspiring members. Mallory said the group provided an important sense of camaraderie—an element at times lacking in Australia's "blokey" macho culture—describing it as "an amazing part of my life". "In Australian culture, especially, there's a missing thing of men getting together and singing," he said. "But we do, and it's fantastic."

Despite their distinct Australian accents and uneven singing abilities, they have been embraced by audiences at home and abroad. Expatriate Russians regularly attend their shows and they have been featured by Russian tele-

vision network Channel One, prompting an outpouring of support from people in the country. "When we started we didn't realize how much it would resonate with Russian people," said Swain.

"But then we started to do gigs and there would be Russian people in the audience and they would all be singing along with every word with tears streaming down their eyes." In turn, the choir—who will release a "very best of" album as their debut in November—have also formed a deep appreciation for Russian music. "The Russian thing was a bit of a left-of-field concept but as we've learnt more Russian songs we've come to appreciate the depth of feeling and history and passion and power that come through the music of Russia," Swain said. "It's next-level musicality, and next-level passion and history."—AFP



English rock musician, singer-songwriter, and composer Roger Waters reacts upon his arrival for the screening of the film 'Roger Waters Us + Them' presented out of competition during the 76th Venice Film Festival at Venice Lido. — AFP

## Pink Floyd legend labels PM Johnson a 'sociopath'

Pink Floyd legend Roger Waters branded British prime minister Boris Johnson a dangerous "sociopath" Friday. The singer said Johnson and other populist leaders like Donald Trump are hell-bent on destroying the planet as a movie of his latest world tour, "Us + Them"—which highlighted the plight of migrants—was premiered at the Venice film festival. He said that like Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, Johnson and Trump had embarked on "a willful quest to destroy this beautiful planet on which we live."

"If we do not resist the neo-liberal and neo-fascist forces that are tearing the planet apart there will not be anything left for our children and their children," the veteran star declared. British-born Waters, a long-time supporter of left-wing causes, told AFP that Johnson "fits all the fascist paradigms. He is a larger-than-life buffoon totally uninterested in anything beyond how can he get power. "Fascism is always an unholy alliance between the ruling and the corporate class with the popular support of the uneducated mass. That is what is happening in the UK at the moment," he insisted.

Nevertheless, Waters said he would gladly sit down with Trump, Johnson or Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage "if such a meeting would bear fruit. I am a great believer of the stone dropped in the well... and the ripple that might do some good." But the writer of such classic protest songs as "The Wall" said none of the wave of populist leaders across Europe were capable of feeling "for a fellow human being. "You either have love in your heart or you don't," he told AFP.

## No love in their hearts

"[Matteo] Salvini has no love in his heart," Waters added, in a swipe at Italy's former far-right interior minister. "Neither does Boris Johnson, neither does Donald Trump," he said. "They are heartless sociopaths. So they shouldn't be taken seriously by ordinary human beings." Waters had earlier told reporters that Trump's and Johnson's divisive brand of politics was "succeeding in keeping ordinary people at each other's throats."

He said the appeal of Trump and other populists was based on fear. "They are amusing and they give (their supporters) permission to be complete arseholes. "It pumps them up" and tells them "that they are better than the blacks and the brown people and anybody who lives in Mexico. However poor you are, you are superior to them," he said. The 76-year-old said so many young fans had flocked to his concerts because "most popular music is entirely devoid of meaning and emotion. They recognize the truth" in the fire-brand lyrics of his songs about US drone strikes and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Earlier at a highly charged press conference, Waters voiced his support for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who he said would probably be killed for revealing US atrocities in Iraq. He also claimed that Brazil's jailed former president Luis Inacio Lula da Silva—or Lula—had been framed on corruption charges and that the "powers that be" had done everything in their power to undermine "Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela".—AFP

## Star-studded 'Band' doc frustrates Toronto critics on opening night

Tales of The Band's descent into drug-fueled feuding are as well-worn as their pioneering Americana sound—but a star-studded documentary opening the Toronto film festival has stoked controversy by largely ignoring them. "Once Were Brothers: Robbie Robertson and The Band," executive produced by Martin Scorsese and featuring rock legends including Bruce Springsteen, Van Morrison and Eric Clapton, was showcased Thursday at North America's biggest film festival.

It follows de facto band leader Robertson's journey from childhood in Toronto, through playing alongside Bob Dylan on his infamous "electric" tour, to culminate with The Band's farewell 1976 gig. The rock outfit never again all appeared on stage after "The Last Waltz" concert, with rifts emerging among the group—in particular between Robertson and drummer Levon Helm, who lapsed into heroin addiction.

"I loved Levon, and we were not 'like brothers' to me—we were brothers," Robertson said Thursday. "Years later, I wasn't there—but for him, it went to another place, and I had no control over that. So I just stepped aside," he added. The Band reformed without Robertson soon after the farewell concert, and toured until another member, Richard Manuel, killed himself. Helm, who penned a memoir accusing Robertson of breaking up the group and monopolizing songwriting credits, died in 2012.

But 26-year-old Canadian director Daniel Roher said he chose to focus on the group's music and camaraderie in their early touring days because that is something "we're going to remember in 100 years." "Part of the legacy of The Band, a lot of the oxygen in that room was absorbed by this apparent feud," he said. "I really just put emphasis on the brotherhood, and what these guys did together, and this extraordinary creative collaboration. And that's what I'm really excited about to share with the film," he added.

Initial reviews suggested that approach was wide of the mark. The Hollywood Reporter said the film took "a respectful fan's-eye view" but avoided taking "more artistic chances," while IndieWire accused it of "reckless self-mythologizing" on behalf of Robertson. The Wrap said the film's "truncated timeline" was "frustrating," and called its selection as the festival's opening-night movie "an odd choice."

## Suspension of disbelief

Robertson—whose memoirs inspired the film, and who provides first-person narration throughout the documentary—did not answer any journalists' questions on the glitzy



US-Italian director Martin Scorsese arrives for the Opening Night Gala presentation of 'Once Were Brothers: Robbie Robertson and The Band' during the Toronto International Film Festival, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. — AFP

premiere's red carpet. Also in attendance was Scorsese, a longtime collaborator with Robertson who will use the musician's talents for the score of his upcoming "The Irishman." The only other surviving band member, Garth Hudson, did not appear.

Festival head Cameron Bailey introduced the opening film by inviting leaders of Canada's indigenous First Nations peoples onto the stage, noting to loud applause that "This is the sacred land that has been the site of human activity for 15,000 years." Elsewhere, British director Armando Iannucci's "The Personal History of David Copperfield" received its world premiere. The film adaptation of Charles Dickens's classic autobiographical novel, set in Victorian London, stars Dev Patel in a title role typically played by white actors.

"As long as you embody a character, there's already a suspension of disbelief in the audience anyway," actress Rosalind Wiseman told Variety. "As long as the actors do a good job... why not?" Hugh Laurie and Tilda Swinton also star along with Game of Thrones' Gwendoline Christie in a cast jokingly described by Patel as the "British Avengers."—AFP



US actress Susan Sarandon takes pictures with fans as she arrives for the premiere of 'Blackbird' during the Toronto International Film Festival in Toronto. — AFP

## Asia's richest man offers free TVs in Indian broadband blitz

Having already turned India's mobile market upside down, Asia's richest man Mukesh Ambani has now set his sights on broadband.

In 2016 Ambani's Jio network entered the mobile telecoms market with free calls and ultra-cheap data, triggering a brutal price war and making Indian mobile data reportedly the cheapest in the world. JioFiber, launched on Thursday, offers a minimum internet speed of 100 megabits per second (Mbps) from 699 rupees per month, around 35 to 45 percent lower than rivals, according to Indian media, going up to one gigabit per second.

"Currently, the average fixed-line broadband speed in India is 25 Mbps. Even in America, which is the most developed economy, it is around 90 Mbps," Ambani's Reliance Jio firm said. Ambani, the world's 13th richest person according to Forbes with a fortune of \$50 billion, has also announced that customers will be able to watch films in their living rooms the day they come out in cinemas, irking film distributors.

In India, video-on-demand growth is explosive, according to researcher Boston Consulting Group which predicts the market could leap to \$5 billion by 2023 from \$500 million last year, according to Bloomberg. Mukesh Ambani is also currently engaged in fierce competition with Amazon and Walmart in an ongoing race to dominate India's e-commerce market.—AFP

## Pop star Eilish urges fans to join climate protests

Pop star Billie Eilish has called on her millions of fans all over the world to participate in massive climate change protests planned for later this month. The American singer urged her 37 million Instagram followers to "take it to the streets" on September 20 and 27 in demonstrations to be held around the same time as the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit.

"Right now, there are millions of people all over the world begging our leaders to pay attention. Our earth is warming up at an unprecedented rate, icecaps are melting, our oceans are rising, our wildlife is being poisoned, and our forests are burning," she wrote. On Wednesday, the 17-year-old also released her latest music video for the song "All Good Girls Go To Hell," which was full of symbolic references to environmental catastrophe.

Large youth-led protests around the planet are scheduled for the Fridays of September 20 and 27 to pressure leaders gathering in New York for the United Nations climate summit on September 23. Teenage environmental activist Greta Thunberg is expected to lead the protests in New York. She arrived in the US financial capital last week after crossing the Atlantic on a zero-carbon emissions yacht. Eilish became the first musician born in the 2000s to top the Billboard Hot 100 last month when her breakout song "Bad Guy" reached number one.—AFP