

Singers lay bare office life

Even the bosses don't get on the wrong side of the Shiny Bums. Diana Streak reports.

CANBERRA'S Shiny Bum Singers are about to hit the international stage in Europe. Well, actually, five of the group are going on a self-funded tour to Britain to show off to fellow public servants with enduring favourites such as *The Office Fridge*.

So, take a deep breath and sing along lustily to the tune of *The Red Flag* (*O Tannenbaum*, *O Christmas Tree*)

*The office fridge is full of slime,
No one has cleaned it in our time,
The shelves a feast of green and grey –
And what's that lurking in the tray?*

*Chorus: So raise the putrid morsel high
To throw it out, or eat and die?*

*Though gourmets flinch and drinkers sneer,
We'll use our fridge for more than beer.*

Get the picture?

Before dusting off their songbooks and warming up their vocal chords, the singers will have to explain to their stiff British audiences that "shiny bum" is an Australian slang term for an office worker. This public service singing group has not only embraced the humour of their name but their songs are a spicy, irreverent take on the ennui and absurdity of office life.

The bums, as they fondly call themselves, were formed in 1999 and their premiere performance was to packed houses at Australia's National Folk Festival. They have published five books containing the words of more than 100 of their parodies and released a CD, *An Audience with the Shiny Bum Singers*, which features 27 tracks from live performance recordings and the cover of which sports their trademark "shiny bum salute".

Five bums will undertake a short tour, May 19 to June 3, of the south of England to share their parodies about work and organisational life. Kerry Kennedy, a bum of long standing, says, "We are doing it just for the hell of it and paying for it ourselves. So far we have confirmed a public service gig at the Met Office in Exeter. We are also arranging performances at the Department of Transport in London and the National School of Government in Sunningdale. We will perform at a folk festival at Bude in Cornwall and at a folk club in Rochester, in east London."

The performances will include a lunchtime show at the Met Office's central atrium in its brand new building.

More informal evening shows will encourage audience participation. "We rewrite words to well-known songs, which means people can sing along. We project the chorus on to a screen then people join in."

Predictably, there is a lot more "joining in" from folk audiences than from the public service.

Fellow bum Chris Clarke says most of their songs have a chorus that makes it easier.

"Folk audiences of course love to join in. We also do workshops because our songs have a lot of actions and animation so we get people to do it with us."

The bums number about 15, with another 10 former members who make the occasional appearance and others waiting in the wings.

Kennedy explains how the British tour came about. "A couple of us had been over,



The Shiny Bums gather at the steps of Old Parliament House before five of them head off to Britain for a tour.



Morning Tea

(to the tune of *Cabaret*)

What good is sitting alone in your bay?
Come have a cup with me
Life is a morning tea, old chum
Come to the morning tea

Put down the filing, or throw it away
There's no time to disagree
Life is a morning tea, old chum
Come to the morning tea

Come taste the cheese
Come hear the goss
Come try the cake
There's no debating
Right this way your coffee's waiting

introduced the idea and sung a few songs. We got a really good reception and people said you must bring the group over, which gave us the idea of doing a tour."

With nothing similar in Britain, Kennedy believes the bums are unique. "Although," he adds, "there are a couple of groups in America doing similar things in Washington. There is also a group of journalists here called the House Howlers from the press corps who also do satire about politics."

The bums and the howlers have performed together on occasion and, no, they have not joined forces as the Howling Bums.

But what exactly do the bums do that entertains their colleagues so much? "We write and perform the work songs of the public service, parodying a range of songs, both traditional and contemporary, to get our message across."

"We tell the funny and sad but true tales of life at work in government organisations, horribly familiar also to business office workers and the victims at the receiving end of government services."

"Recent 'reforms' and trends in modernising management, current working conditions and technology, and our political environment are all lampooned with equal fervour."

Members have written the songs, some to

immediate approval and others that needed a bit of workshoping.

Kennedy says, "We still sing songs that were in the very first performance in '99."

Favourites include *Work is Boring* to the tune of *London's Burning*, *The Office Fridge* and *You'll Never Work Alone* to the tune of *You'll Never Walk Alone*.

Then there is the one that refers to the typical civil servant working dress, the dreaded grey suit. *Daggy Suit* is sung to the tune of *Peggy Sue*.

The bums don't all wear grey suits, or even navy blue suits, but have taken to sporting South Park ties to create a subversive sense of uniform.

And their employers generally indulge them. "The first non-folk festival that the bums did was at the personal invitation of Dr Allan Hawke who was then secretary of the Department of Transport," says Kennedy.

"We've made sure we keep in touch with the powers that be, and send them copies of the CD and books."

Do the bosses vet anything? "Oh God no! And if they did, we'd write a song about it, and they know that. Never get the wrong side of a parody writer."

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