



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

An exceptional concert by male voice choir Only Men Aloud reminds Jules of the things the Welsh do so well – singing, storytelling and recounting a good joke

A couple of weeks ago, some friends from Hereford kindly invited us down to Monmouth for a Friday night out, and we were delighted. The venue, the Savoy Theatre, offered a welcome step back in time to the 1900s, in a building that can have changed little from the days of the musical hall and variety acts that would have brought much colour and excitement to Monmouth in the days before TV and radio. Having left our friends to make the arrangements, we were unsure of what we'd see, other than a Welsh male voice choir. On the journey down, Sally and Mark began to manage our expectations. "We really have no idea what this lot will be like. If they're hopeless, we can always leave it and get a pint!" But I was optimistic. Ever since I first heard my old local in Llandewi Brefi erupt into song when the village football team won the cup back in 1990, I've had a soft spot for a Welsh choir. I freely admit my iPod has a whole football pitch of its memory set aside for a growing collection of songs. Besides, I rather liked the sound of the boys we were going to hear: OMA, or Only Men Aloud. To get away with calling yourself after a Spice Girls tribute band needed not only a sense of humour, but also the certain knowledge you'd knock them flying in the talent stakes, and stand a good chance of taking the roof off the place. And they did.

We were in on the first night of their Welsh Tour for 2014, and they were simply astonishing. From the choreography to the arrangements and the sheer passion and gifted ability throughout the whole cast, they are rightly proud of having won the BBC's *Last Choir Standing*. What's more, they've all come together not because of the money, but because of the music, and it showed.

Over the years Wales has thrown up many things that have inspired me. The landscape, the history, and of course the singing. Songwriting, too, has a proud heritage throughout Wales, linked closely to that of storytelling. Without exception, to my mind a joke is never funnier than when it's recounted by a Welshman, and a story never as compelling. The great bardic traditions of storytelling go back hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and are today much celebrated at the annual National

Eisteddfod, and in countless other smaller events around the country.

Telling a good yarn isn't easy, and those who make it look so are technicians of their trade. I count myself very lucky to have stumbled across some of the best in the pubs and communities I've explored across the Welsh Borders over the last 25 years. Their love of the tale, of timing, and the accents that wrap the whole package up into a mouthwatering meal for the imagination are second to none.

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This storytelling pedigree circled around my mind as the boys belted out their finest from the stage. There wasn't a soul in the Savoy that night who wasn't moved as the performance rose to its climax. As I looked around, the audience were already preparing to get to their feet before the final bars had been sung. Without prompting, we all bounced up, yelling and clapping and cheering, demanding more so as not to break the spell the choir had cast. We would've stayed all night I'm sure.

How might it have been 2,000 years ago atop a torch-lit hill fort? Did our Iron Age ancestors demand encores from the old bards as they sang of heroes past? Music has always had the power to beguile us. How we value it has made millionaires of many a rock star.

We often like to say we should sing for our supper, but next time I meet the lads from OMA I'll do the cooking, whilst they do the clever stuff.

- *Black Sheep is away.*

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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