

## **Q&A THE SONG KEEPERS with Naina Sen**

**Q1. The Song Keepers tells the extraordinary tale of the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir and their custodianship of historical German songs which they bring back to Germany on a tour during their first ever trip overseas. How did you come to be involved in their unique and compelling story?**

I first heard about the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir totally by chance on a flight from Melbourne to Alice Springs in early 2014 from a lovely woman, Miranda Daniels, sitting next to me on the plane. We started talking about my work as a documentary filmmaker and installation artist and in the process she told me about this amazing women's choir from Central Australia. Over the next few days, I looked up some of their performance videos online (which were hard to find and few and far between) and I was immediately intrigued.

I got in touch with Miranda and said I'd love to talk to Morris Stuart, the Choir's conductor about creating audio-visual projections to accompany their singing and possibly developing a documentary. Some weeks later Morris and I had our first of many long conversations about the choir, the choral history of Central Australia and my interest in working with him and the choir. He said they were developing a new choral show to take on a historic tour to Germany in 2015 and loved the idea of projections to accompany their singing.

My immediate response to all of this was of course there needs to be a documentary on this incredible completely unknown story. Morris talked about how the women had been wanting to tell the story of their music and history for a while now, so, maybe with the upcoming tour, the time to tell that story had come.

A few months later, I met the choir for the first time in a small church in Alice Springs and sat in on their rehearsal. Those YouTube videos that had compelled me to track down Morris, hadn't remotely done justice to their music. I'd never heard anything like it. There was something so emotionally compelling about how they sang. Even though I didn't understand what they were singing about, I understood how it made me feel - joyous, inspired and completely intrigued by who these amazing women were and how they came to work with their equally charismatic conductor. That was the start of an incredible three-year journey that would culminate in *The Song Keepers*, my debut feature documentary.

I began creative development with some of the key senior women of the choir and Morris to develop narrative and visual components for their choral show. We also began exploring the idea of creating a documentary on the tour and the choir. The key senior members of the choir expressed they had been wanting to tell this bigger story for some time now and with the upcoming tour to Germany, it seemed the right time to tell the whole story. Their story.

So over the next year, whilst filming and creating the projections for the show, I began research and writing a treatment for the documentary and the selective filming of interviews, rehearsals and performances and in May 2015 my production crew and I (another cinematographer and a sound recordist) travelled with the choir on their historic tour to Germany.

**Q2. With a background in music videos, documentary and installation work, you are well placed to be the writer, helmer and director of photography for this musical documentary - yet at times it must have been difficult to do so much on your own. What challenges did you face when oscillating between these roles?**

The Song Keepers was filmed over a two-and-a-half year period. Having the luxury of filming intermittently over such a long period of time meant that the main characters and the many nuances of this story presented themselves organically through comprehensive research and the building of strong relationships between the women, Morris and I. Some of the early rehearsal filming and smaller interviews I did

with some of the key women and Morris, became the foundation of the treatment of the story, which continued to evolve over time. The development and research time I had, to write that treatment before the big shooting phases of this film really focused my vision as a director of what elements of the story I wanted to capture and how during the first two big phases of filming: The preparation and rehearsals before Germany and the tour itself. This clarity of what the story I wanted to tell really helped ground me whilst I oscillated between my different roles.

In early 2015, we brought cinematographer Chris Phillips on board and he and I travelled with Morris and Barbara Stuart to the different communities as Morris and the women rehearsed and developed their new choral show. Having Chris there to share the filming load was invaluable not just because of his beautiful cinematic eye which I believe took the filming to another level, but it also meant that I didn't have to film such a large ensemble cast all by myself, whilst simultaneously directing, which was one of the biggest challenges I had faced till then. Having another cinematographer with me meant we finally had multiple cameras for coverage for the rehearsals and big interviews and I had more space as the director to focus on how best to capture and tell the story that was evolving in front of me with so many constantly changing variables that come with filming in remote communities. Our biggest challenge was time as we were simultaneously shooting vision for the projections for the show, so finding enough time to adequately do both was a big challenge. Suffice to say we had very very long shooting days and Chris was amazing.

Whilst we were on tour in Germany, a childhood friend of mine from India, Raoul Amaar Abbas, who is also a filmmaker, happened to be in Germany while we were there - so he came on board for part of the tour as an additional cinematographer and the two of us, along with sound recordist Francis Diatschenko, had an incredible time on the road with the choir. Again, having the two of them there meant along with filming, I had the head space to make sure the overarching themes of the story were being captured in the right way.

We also had great support from Morris, the women, Pastor Rob and the travelling support team to facilitate what we needed to do within a pretty hectic touring schedule and a touring part of 40!

The key thing that made all of this possible though was the support, openness and patience that Morris and the women showed me in helping me uncover various aspects of this layered story and generously sharing their personal stories and lives with me. Without their genuine participation and input, there would be no film and one of my biggest highlights has been the collaborative nature of how this film has developed.

This film was made with a lot of love and the support of many people and the serendipity of many things coming together. So yes, whilst I certainly had my work cut out for me as the director, writer and cinematographer, I certainly didn't do it alone and even when the work load of my multiple roles was overwhelming, it was always outweighed by the sheer joy and fun I had whilst making this film and getting to know these amazing women.

**Q3. There is a truly joyous and captivating scene during the German tour when choir members start playing games with each other while laughing and singing childhood songs. As a documentarian, what was your approach to capturing these natural scenes? What efforts did you make to gain the trust of the women in the choir before you commenced shooting?**

That scene is one of my favourites from the film too because it captures the women in their total element; strong, cheeky, hilarious, proud and completely sure of who they are, which to me was a central element of why I wanted to make this film - to take the audience on a journey to get to know these amazing stateswomen in an intimate way and on *their* own terms.

From a filmmaking point of view, by the time we got to Germany, I had been working

with the choir for over a year, quite extensively, so I had developed strong friendships particularly with the key women in the story and the choir as a whole by all of us just spending time together in their communities and on tour. Time talking, time having cups of tea, time filming, time collaborating on the projections for the show, time rehearsing for the show. Like any relationship, we got to know each other and trust each other over time. The women had great ownership and pride in wanting to tell this story so the effort and relationship building and trust happened from both sides quite organically.

We had been filming on and off, often with just me, so the women were quite used to me filming them so I kind of became part of the furniture really. As I was also creating and operating projections for the show, when I wasn't filming rehearsals, I was part of rehearsals, so it was like I was part of the band as well (a 32 member, very fun band!) and we were all embarking on this adventure together. I think all these things together created an environment where the women were totally themselves on camera and that's what that scene captures.

From a story point of view, I wanted to capture the tour and events in Germany as naturally as possible, from a fly on the wall perspective, so it was the women who were showing you their world and who they were, whilst navigating a totally new world. As much as capturing the performances and audiences were important, to me what was key was filming the women as unobtrusively as possible as they experienced a new country, a new culture and took all of it in their stride with such strength, confidence, pride, humour and enjoyment. It was a privilege to witness and document. Having a small crew of only three people I think helped greatly in being able to get the intimacy and openness in the footage that we did.

**Q4. The German tour went for an extensive amount of time. How did the length of the tour impact or limit your filming schedule? And how did you balance that with the Choir's backstory? Were these decisions made before or during the shoot - or in the edit suite?!**

It wasn't so much of the length of the tour that impacted our filming schedule, as much as how jam packed the tour was with performances, events, sightseeing etc, so for me it was making those decisions day to day on the fly, of what to film. I wanted to ensure we were capturing all the important things that were happening on the tour but still giving the women enough space to enjoy themselves and take in all the experiences they were having without them getting camera fatigue, so when they were being filmed, they could just be themselves. Also, I wanted to ensure that the filming didn't impact on their rest time too much, as the touring schedule was so demanding and they had to be at their best each night while they performed.

In regards to the back stories, when we went on our first big filming trip to the communities in early 2015, I made the decision *then* to focus the filming on the rehearsals and the first round of interviews with the key women that focused more on the choir and their personal anecdotes of growing up with this choral history. Given how heavy their rehearsal schedule was at that point and the fact that we were also filming for the projections for the show, I decided to film all the back stories during our final phase of filming after we came back from the Germany tour. I wanted to film the back stories on community, at a time when the women could just focus on the telling of these important, deeply personal stories in a relaxed, safe environment where they were unencumbered by anything else.

The intention was always to film these stories against the sweeping landscapes of the Central Desert, to place viewers firmly in the environments these stories and women are from, in contrast to the rehearsal spaces and urban environs of the tour of Germany, through which these stories are weaved.

Being able to film these stories in our last filming phase also meant that my relationship with the key main women had also grown substantially after being on tour with them so there was a different level of trust again between us. It also meant

that the women had time and perspective to think about how they wanted to tell these stories and what parts of their story they wanted to share with a wider audience. Together, we also had time to discuss and prepare for how I would illustrate some of those elements in a personal and respectful way. From a directing point of view, It also gave me a chance to go through all the footage we had collected till date and cinematically and stylistically prepare for how I wanted to film those back stories to create a juxtaposition between them and the very deliberate cinema verity style of other parts of the film. Given how important these stories are and how privileged I felt to be entrusted with them, I wanted to make sure the women got to tell their stories exactly how they wanted to.

**Q5. What ideas do you have for your next project? Will we have the pleasure of seeing more of your work soon?**

Going through the process of making my first feature documentary has been an incredible journey and a massive learning curve! I don't think I've ever felt so simultaneously rewarded, content, proud and exhausted! My current priority is trying to make sure as many people as possible get to watch this film so the women can share their story and music with the world! Having said that, I'm in development on a few different projects that deal with the things that I'm most interested in; personal storytelling, identity and cultural diversity and connection. I'm currently in development of a story that explores the connections between Indigenous and Indian culture and hope to tell more stories in the future that explore my own cultural heritage. Watch this space!