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Catching a break

After split, Einhorn has Scotland Yard Gospel Choir growing with heartfelt lyrics, unforgettable hooks

On the strength of steady gigging, a lot of hard work and the gorgeous single "Jennie That Cries," folk-rockers/orchestral popsters the Scotland Yard Gospel Choir were well on their way to turning a strong local following into a full-fledged national buzz when they re-released their first album — "I Bet You Say That to All the Boys," first issued in 2003 — with wider distribution in 2005.

Guitarist-vocalist Elia Einhorn had formed the group in 2001, when he was studying music at Columbia College. He split the songwriting duties with fellow singer Matthew Kerstein, and the two equally shared the spotlight. Then, in November 2005, Kerstein suddenly quit to front his own band, Brighton, MA.

"There was a period of excruciating uncertainty, and I cried about it several times," Einhorn recalls. "I was afraid that all the work I'd put in was for nothing — that I was going to have to start all over again with a new name. I actually broke the band up for two or three weeks, and then I thought, 'You know what? We've got this amazing thing that we put five years into. There's no way I'm throwing all this away!'"

Einhorn decided to continue under the name he'd originally chosen, scrapping the second album the group had started recording with half of his songs and half of Kerstein's. "By the time he left, we really had two bands in one band: We had his long, flowery, kind of Van Morrison pieces, and then we had my fat-free, concise, British-influenced rock.



Elia Einhorn, guitarist and vocalist for the Scotland Yard Gospel Choir, wants his songs to reflect real emotions.

Two years ago, when all that stuff went down, I had no idea that I'd be where we are now. But now I think it was really a blessing in disguise."

Indeed. Recently signed to Chicago's adventurous and independent Bloodshot Records, Einhorn — the only constant band member amid a large, rotating cast of musicians who join him onstage and in the studio — endured to craft a second self-titled release that not only fulfills the promise of earlier songs but shows considerable growth with more heartfelt and brutally honest lyrics and dozens of unforgettable hooks set in lush arrangements — rife with acoustic strings, horns, layered harmonies and propulsive percussion. But getting there was hardly easy.

"Oh, my God: It took four years to make this album!" Einhorn says. After starting



Scotland Yard Gospel Choir, which plays tonight at the Empty Bottle, turned to Bloodshot Records to release its second album.

and restarting the sessions several times, an engineer in one of the five studios where the band worked actually yelled at Einhorn that he had to stop the insanity and finally let the album go. The musician admits to being obsessive-compulsive, but he says he was always more concerned about the quality of the songwriting than some elusive "perfect"

sound. "I feel like in a lot of ways, I'm the only final judge of these songs. With everything the band has gone through, if I'd listened to everything everyone had said, we would have never put out any records, or we would have sounded like a mix compilation of four different bands. In the end, no matter how many people

disagree with me, I just say, 'This is what we're going to do.'"

So what was he really trying to do with these songs?

"I didn't want to write in an abstract way, where I was painting with emotions. I just wanted to say: 'This is how I feel; this is what's happening, this is the situation,' and then put it to melodies and music that would balance the hurt and emotion in the lyrics."

To that end, the album boasts songs such as "Aspidistra," an effervescent pop tune about a dark period when Einhorn lost control to substance abuse; "This World Has No Place for Me," as eloquent an expression of depression as anything Morrissey ever penned, and "Then and Not a Moment Before," a shockingly cheerful ditty about the broken home of the singer's youth, which was di-

THE SCOTLAND YARD GOSPEL CHOIR

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vided between school years spent with his mother in Chicago and summers with his father in Wales.

Why are happy songs about crushingly sad events so powerful?

"That's how I experience life," Einhorn says. "I have this terrible anxiety disorder and OCD, so a lot of the time, I just feel crushed inside. But on the other hand, there's all this beauty and life and laughter and joy. I feel that putting songs together like that represents the spectrum of emotions in my life, and in everyone's life. There's kind of a tension and release to life, which I think you find in the best classical music.

"To me, there's no point in writing a song if it's not going to be real. I've always thought Morrissey's song 'Sing Your Life' has always been the prescription for me: 'Sing your life / Just walk right up to the microphone / And name all the things that you love / All the things that you loathe.' So I just put it all out there, and if people don't like it, they don't have to listen to it. I think Jeff Tweedy is another Chicagoan who really does that, and I really appreciate it."