



The Musician interview

Eleven-piece collective **Bellowhead** go from strength to strength. But how do you make a big band work?

Feature by
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Jon Bowden and John Spiers were stuck in traffic on the M25 when the idea of forming Bellowhead first occurred to them. It was 2004 and the folk duo (vocals/fiddle and melodeon/concertina, respectively) were en route to a gig in Cambridge. Their idea was to create a band that had fun at festivals, 'something exciting based on English music'. By the time the traffic started moving, phone calls to other musicians had been made and the nucleus of an 11-piece band was in place.

A storming debut gig at Oxford Folk Festival convinced Bowden and Spiers that they had created something special. Within months, Bellowhead had gained a reputation as a ferocious live act, notable for their unbridled, bawdy spirit. From the outset, the band drew their material largely from the broad English folk canon, making the tunes, arrangements and sometimes the lyrics their own, in a worldly mix that includes disco, African music, 1970s TV themes, funk and Latin.

Seven years on, Bellowhead are promoting their third album, *Hedonism*, a dynamic and potent work featuring soaring instrumentals and sprightly acoustic pop, recorded at Abbey Road Studios with producer John Leckie. In February, for the fifth time, Bellowhead were named Best Live Act at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards. As they prepare for a gig-filled

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Summer debuting at major festivals such as Glastonbury, Latitude and V, all the signs are that Bellowhead are increasingly capturing a mainstream market. *The Musician* spoke to John Spiers and cellist/fiddle player/singer, Rachael McShane about the band's steady rise...

When you were sitting in that M25 traffic jam in 2004, did you ever think that Bellowhead would go so far?

John Spiers: We didn't originally see this as any more than an experimental project. But from our experience playing sessions and in places where traditional English music could be exciting, we knew we could bring that element to a stage if we had the right instruments and the right influences.

Did you need 11 members to achieve that?
Rachael McShane: If you're going to go big you may as well go really big. We were put together initially to create a "wow" factor.

JS: We'd looked into the idea of having brass in the band, as folk bands such as Brass Monkey and Home Service had done. But we also took our influences from a lot of disco tracks — the melding of traditional and slightly old-fashioned popular music. We found that if you had a brass section, you nearly always had it balanced up by a string section. By the time you're there, you're at 10 members at least [laughs].

Is that the aspect you've taken from disco, then — the marrying of brass and strings?

JS: That was the initial thinking, yes. There are so many various textures you can get through different instruments. You can bring in a bass clarinet, a sax player and get a very orchestral sound as well. And the brass section isn't just a pop brass section — they can play in a number of styles. We have a group of very talented musicians that we're lucky enough to be in a band with right now. →



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Getting four people together in the same place at the same time can be a logistical nightmare. What's it like with 11?

JS: It's a lot of a nightmare [laughs]. The band members have lots of projects on and ensuring that everyone is available when we need is tricky.

RM: Having 11 band members is possibly easier in that there's always someone to go and talk to if someone is irritating you. It's usually quite crowded in the dressing rooms. But we all get on pretty well, I think.

You're a successful band with a high profile. Are you making a comfortable full-time living out of Bellowhead?

RM: It's not enough to earn a living from what we do at the moment, so everybody does other things as well. I've got my own

band and do various random projects and some teaching. Certainly, we do okay as Bellowhead when we're on tour but we couldn't sustain it through the year. There are just too many people to pay — 11 of us plus a manager, PR and soundman.

JS: But it's nice to have the diversity of other projects, and I think that helps. It's what everyone brings to the table as a band member. Whereas if we were stuck together full-time, our horizons would be only on Bellowhead and we wouldn't bring external music to the melting pot.

You've received some criticism for reworking traditional songs. How do you respond?

JS: Well, I don't agree with them. And also, I find that, quite often, when you listen to some of the people who have criticised us, you find in their work that they've done exactly the same thing at some stage in their career and have developed this purist mind-set. We've just got to take that as a lesson to check ourselves.

RM: You're always going to annoy someone aren't you? That's fair enough — if people don't like it, that's fine. For me, anyone that does something with the folk material that they enjoy and that other people enjoy is good because it keeps the music alive.

Bellowhead are frequently hailed as the best live band in the UK. How do you capture that live spirit in the studio?

RM: On our first two albums, I don't think we had captured it — I think we were just getting to grips with how the band worked and how to record it. With *Hedonism*, our aim was to create something that had the spirit of our live gigs. We recorded it at Abbey Road, in Studio Two, and had a fab producer, John Leckie. Those factors, and the fact that we could all see each other, made a huge difference. It was all live and, this time, we'd toured all the songs before recording them so they had the right feel.

JS: We did give ourselves more of a chance with this album, to bed it in with a tour of Wales, because we knew we were recording the album live so there was an added pressure to become more together with the music beforehand.

You have toured in Europe and Canada but not the US. Why is that?

RM: I don't think we really fancy the States because it's so difficult with the visas. You have to go down to London, sit in a queue, get it stamped yes or no. You've already had to buy your tickets by that time and you can actually get over there and they

Bellowhead's Brendan Kelly (left) and John Spiers: where folk meets disco



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Songs of the people

The lyrics of traditional songs resonate centuries on, says John Spiers: 'People don't change and the songs are generally about people. Some of the circumstances they find themselves in the old songs are incredible [laughs]. But the main protagonists will have the same emotions as we would now. A good love story is a

good love story and a good murder story is a good murder story. I know that Jon Bowden, our main singer, feels awkward sometimes if the lyrics are very archaic because it might not bring the story to a modern audience. So he may adapt them. A song like *The Outlandish Knight*, from our first CD, is actually from Norse mythology.'



Earning a living: 'We do okay on tour, but we couldn't sustain it through the year'

may just send you back. So we just didn't fancy the hassle, whereas Canada have got a great folk music scene and it's easier.

Why did you join the MU and have you ever had cause to use its services?

RM: I joined as a student, when I had just started doing gigs. It was certainly worth doing, particularly for checking contracts, because legal jargon is beyond me.

The industry is undergoing profound changes, with artists having to look towards new revenue models to survive. Has this downturn impacted on you or are your sales still more CD-based?

RM: Obviously, it's so easy for people to listen to music for free on things such as Spotify and it's so easy for people to copy

music, whether that's legally or illegally. Our aim has always been to create a nice product to own — we've always had attractive album packages and booklets. But there's never going to be a huge amount of money to be made from CDs. The gigs are where the magic happens and people enjoy that.

JS: I think people are fairly conscientious, for the main part, about how they purchase or listen to music. I think people will buy music if they really want to own it, and buy it in a physical format if they really want to have it like that. It would be a shame if physical formats disappeared entirely just because it allows you to create and print the ultimate nice packages, which we've really pushed for from the start.

Looking back on the last seven years, which are the real "hair on the back of the neck" moments that stand out?

RM: Playing the Royal Albert Hall was pretty special, although I'm not sure that did it to me the same way as, say, Shepherd's Bush Empire. Certainly, going to record at Abbey Road was pretty special. I thought; "I feel like a proper musician today" [laughs].

JS: There are plenty. Playing on Jools Holland's *Hootenanny* on the same stage as Kylie Minogue — who I used to watch on *Neighbours* as a kid — was pretty special. But I think the first time we were on stage at Oxford Folk Festival stands out. I've got

a recording of that gig and it's ropey as hell but playing the folk tunes I've been playing for years, but with the energy you get with an 11-piece band, and just experiencing the lift... It was the *Rochdale Coconut Dance* with a fairly upbeat disco brass riff. When that started going, the adrenaline took me away. I thought, "I can't go back now, because this is brilliant". ■■■■

Come together

As a band, Bellowhead are committed to communal music in pubs and clubs, and the role of grass roots music in keeping traditional songs alive.

'Oh, I think it's incredibly important,' says Rachael McShane. 'It's not just a singing theme, there's a big folk tune session theme as well.'

'It's what's kept them alive really,' adds John Spiers. 'The English tradition has suffered in that we've been very aggressive as a modern society. In that situation, you often lose singing traditions or they develop into different things. It really suffered after the First World War, when so many died and people looked to the future. They didn't want to know about the past.'

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Rachael McShane: 'The gigs are where the magic happens'

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