

World Of Wales

'We're not specifically a Welsh folk band. We play world music really,' say Jamie Smith's Mabon (from Wales).

Sarah Coxson nods sagely.

The re-branded Jamie Smith's Mabon have been about since late 2010. Their reputation precedes them. Plaudits abound. There is an exhilarated buzz about their live performance – at the Welsh showcase event at Womex, at festivals and the UK gigs they are now getting under their belts. Being a bit slow on the uptake, I have only just managed to see them play live. Now I get it. This seems to be a default position for most.

"There's a surprise factor! Like 'Where've you just landed from?' People seem very surprised that we're fully fledged and steaming away when they see us for the first time."

To find out from where exactly they have landed, I met up with frontman Jamie Smith and behind-the-drumkit-man Iolo Whelan in a Bristol café. Between the coffee grinding and the percolating, they place themselves firmly on the map.

Jamie Smith's Mabon are a class act. Both fur coat *and* knickers. Uplifting, energetic and cerebral in equal measure backed up by deft musicianship, tight arrangements, organic and shifting dynamics, tempos, grooves and textures – a journey into interceltic time, space, dimension and soundscape. "Interceltic music is as close as you can get to summing us up in few words!"

They also sound fresh – a cold-air blast of relief from the soundalikes that quite naturally emerge from specific scenes around the country. Despite having evolved from a Welsh musical background, they would not define their sound as Welsh. Whilst clearly laying down some homegrown roots, it is an outward-seeking sound, taking on board influences from the Balkans to their beloved Brittany.

They define themselves as a 'concert band'. This isn't so much frenzied good-time dance music meant for late night sweaty moshing, it's more intended as thinking person's music, designed to take the listener on a journey.

"Don't get me wrong, we've got no problem with people dancing!" reassures Jamie. Dancing just requires careful concentration, to avoid becoming wrong-footed by the mercurial ebb and flow of the arrangements.

The night I saw them in Bangor's Pontio Cabaret where there was ample room for bouncing hardcore ravers (somewhat

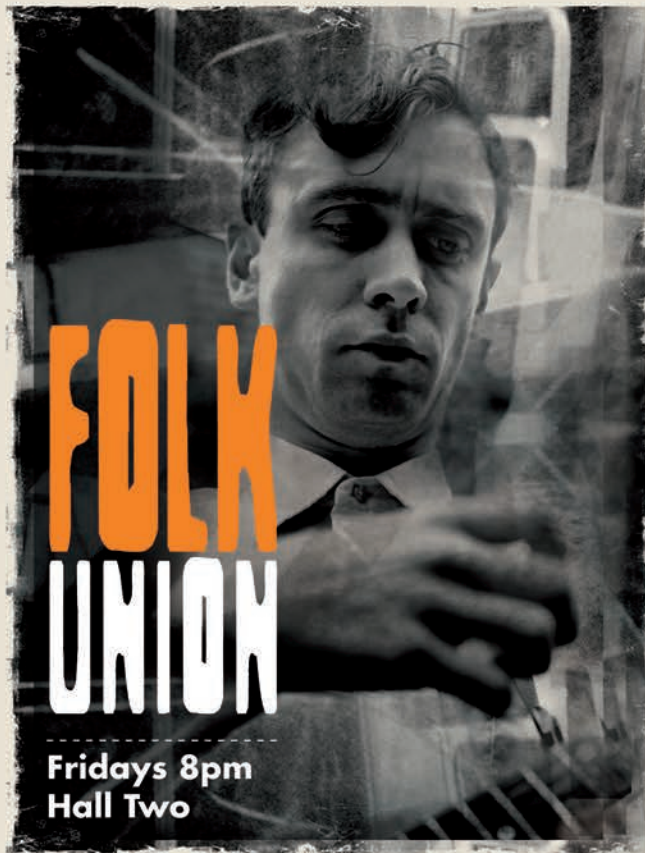
reminiscent of Tyres in *Spaced*, for those with knowledge of the cult TV series) alongside the more contemplative seated types. The fluid melodic interplay between accordionista Jamie Smith and fiddler Oli Wilson-Dickson (and occasionally flute-playing Calum Stewart) is certainly galvanising, swathed in the infectious rhythmic drive of Matt Downer on bass guitar and upright bass, Adam Rhodes on bouzouki and percussionist Iolo Whelan.

Jamie Smith's Mabon are indeed fully fledged, as Iolo previously pointed out. They are evolved and fine-honed, musically and professionally. And this is because they haven't just landed from nowhere. They have learned and developed their craft at the coalface. Just not in your face.



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The current model is reworked and re-peopled from the original Mabon formed in 1999 – a four-piece acoustic band playing Welsh folk dance music for the group Dawnsyr Gwerin Pen-y-Fai, featuring original line-up of father and son, guitarist Derek and accordionist Jamie Smith, and brothers, percussionist Iolo and fiddler Gareth Whelan.

Jamie and Iolo are the sole surviving members from this early incarnation. The 2011 rebranding was an acknowledgement that Jamie's playing and compositions had now become the essence of the band's sound, as well as marking a new line-up, and the departure of Derek.

Jamie oozes natural talent as a piano accordion player and has dabbled with playing the instrument since a very early age... if reluctantly at first. "I took up the accordion *seriously* when I was 15. I was in denial for quite a while – I played guitar and tried to look moody – but I realised that, annoyingly, I could play the accordion, so thought I'd better do that!"

"I learned to play, more or less, listening to the first Lunasa album, to Mike McGoldrick, Flook, John McCusker's earlier stuff – his tune writing – and people like Sharon Shannon. I took ideas from flute and fiddle playing, button accordion playing. Anything that wasn't necessarily on the piano accordion – I wasn't a great fan!"

He has served his apprenticeship in the band. "I was 16 or so when it started, so didn't really know much." In the intervening years, a lot of water has passed under the bridge, many life lessons learned, several line-up changes, shifts in instrumentation and three albums – *Ridiculous Thinkers* (2004), *OK Pewter* (2007) and *Live At The Grand Pavilion* (2010) – for a start.

After playing for folk dancing, the original quartet line-up properly cut their teeth at the Festival Interceltique de Lorient in 1999. This taster was enough to spur them on to play concerts more often back home in South Wales, with a repertoire mainly gleaned from traditional Welsh, Scottish and Irish tradition. However, it wasn't long before Jamie started turning his hand to composition too. "I naturally came up with things when I practised. It's the same thing as I do now really. It hasn't changed. It's my way of practising."

"What I like about original material is that it's just wherever your imagination takes you. You haven't got a starting point of any traditional tune or whatever. You can take things wherever you want, especially when you have such a versatile band, the musicians that we've got now, who can really take it in different directions."

As well as playing pubs and clubs in the Bridgend area, playing at the fringe of Festival Interceltique became a key regular gig for the early Mabon, with an annual pilgrimage to Lorient for ten days of hard graft, hired by bars to play short 20-25 minute sets throughout the day. Iolo cites their experience in Brittany as formative: "Our Hamburg years, you could say!"

Jamie explained how, during the festival, the avenues of the seaport would be teeming with people meandering past the many bars, which were all vying for their custom. "Our job was to play on these little stage areas outside bars, to try and attract as many people as possible so they'd stop, sit down and order drinks."

Earning their stripes the hard way, playing on a fish-infused, maggot-ridden pallet stage on one notable occasion, the band reaped the benefits in terms of bedding in their material, fine-honing their performance skills and, of course, exposing their music to new audiences.

Iolo: "It's the largest Celtic festival in the world. Festival organisers and everyone with an interest in Celtic music comes to see what's going on. They may go to official concerts but when those finish they go and drink in the bars and check out the bands. We were approached quite a bit. That's where a lot of our European work came from originally." In a satisfying 'full-circle', "after years of grafting at the fringe, almost like a coming of age thing, we were invited as part of the official festival."

And that is where – until more recently – the band found most of their work lay, not on home turf in South Wales or throughout the UK but at European festivals. 2009, ten years from their inception, saw their first UK tour. This, in some ways, informs their 'outsider' perception.

Jamie: "I think there are strong advantages and disadvantages to having grown outside of a 'scene'. It's made us more unique, a big plus. On the negative side, it's harder to get out there and get noticed."

They are confident that when this happens, there is a chemistry that works in their favour. "I think the main thing that motivates us is the reaction at gigs, when we see our enjoyment of the music reflected in the audience. Gigs are such positive experiences."

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However, not for the first time during the interview, I pick up on their niggling anxieties about prejudice, 'dance-band' presumption, 'folk-rock' pigeonholing ("I think about 34 seconds of our set could be classed as folk-rock!") and about their position and place in both the Welsh folk scene and the wider British scene. Specifically, we discuss the dangers of unadventurous booking policies and the lack of variety and emergent talent in festival line-ups.

Iolo, who felt that playing at Womad in 2011 was a real "seminal career moment!" delved into this further by way of explanation: "It's about developing a relationship with the audience so that they trust you. Look at how brave they are at Womad... you scan down a list with 50 different artists and might only recognise a few, never heard of any of the others, but you know there are going to be moments when your jaw is on the floor. Wow! If that festival has managed to nurture that ethos, that relationship, it should be possible for other festivals to do that as well."

Their own ears and minds have been open to many new musical possibilities as a result of their pan-European evolution. "We're not specifically a Welsh folk band. We play world music really. And going to all those festivals leads into musical inspiration. Exposure to all those bands from different countries, well, it all goes in and comes out in creative ways."

The current line-up has also opened up possibilities in terms of technique, influences and versatility. Several players – Matt, Adam and Iolo specifically – have jazz training which the percussionist believes has engendered in them a hypersensitive level of awareness, "to be responsive to other musicians, to play in the moment and to be appropriate to the moment. That's the underlying fundamental ethic of how I try to approach the music... to try and not get in the way of it."

I comment on the fact that on several occasions during the live set different members of the band leave the stage. "When you've got such great musicians it's nice to just focus in on different instruments and different sounds," says Jamie.

Iolo adds "There's something about the organic nature of it. If a tune is working with two or three musicians, the rest of us don't feel the need to be playing all the time. The music dictates that to a certain extent."

Jamie: "Yeah, you don't have to have drums all the time... as long as you have the accordion! One of the main things we are about is the contrast of ideas. Otherwise, we'd just feel bored if we played set after set of fast jigs and reels. If we'd get fed up with that surely lots of people who were listening would too."

Another recent innovation is the introduction of Jamie's own songs – which easily hold their own in the instrumental-dominated set. At Christmas, a download track was emailed to mailing list members of a track called *Yes, We Sing Now!*

Jamie: "Once again, it's a developmental thing for me. When I was 18, what grabbed me was the instrumental bands, the ones playing great tunes. I used to *just* be interested in the tune playing but, as I've matured, I've got more and more into folk singing." Here Jamie cites cover star Karine Polwart's original songwriting as an inspiration. "I want to write songs of that calibre, within the genre. That's what I aspire to do. It's not tokenistic. It's related to what Mabon are about, bringing the threads together."

And we can look forward to more of these Midas threads of Jamie's songs and tunes being woven together on the band's forthcoming album, scheduled for release, rather neatly, on the Autumn Equinox festival of Mabon.

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