



The Band of Holy Joy are more alternative than anything John Peel plays, but still want to be big. Interview: Mark Piggott

The Band of Holy Joy are different. They sing elaborate songs with elaborate tunes and use unorthodox instruments to create their unique sound. The feel of their debut album *More Tales from the City* is sometimes almost maritime, evoking visions of pirates drinking rum. Yet their disturbing lyrics about madness and a large quantity of black humour make their music possibly the most interesting sound around. But the image the music press has created has been that of a bunch of mysterious eccentrics haunting New Cross in South East London, making macabre music and generally acting strangely. Perhaps the music press's difficulty has been its inability to label them; this band are as far removed from the mainstream as you could imagine.

With a vague feeling of trepidation, I make the trek to Flim Flam's office in Camberwell Green to meet two of the band. Johnny, the singer, is a friendly young Geordie with MacGowan-esque teeth. Billy, the drummer, is a serious looking Londoner, New Cross born and bred. Reassured by their lack of abnormality and the lack of most of the band, we chat around the main feature of the small office, a pool table. I ask Johnny why he left Newcastle. "I didn't really plan it, I just drifted down. It was an accident really." He is quite cheerful about the mishap. But what are Billy's feelings for the run-down area he has lived in all his life? Doesn't he ever want to leave? "Maybe one day. I grew up around there. It gets a bit depressing sometimes, but..." He shrugs. Silence. Undaunted, I ask the two how the Band of Holy Joy came together.

"We all met at parties and stuff. Me, Max (keyboards) and Big John (keyboards, banjo and accordion) started writing songs together." But he doesn't think their sound is contrived. "It's natural, it's the way we are."

The band are well chuffed with their first album. But where do they go from here? Billy is in no doubt. "Just keep writing, you know, playing, writing more songs. We like being in the band and everything. See the world..."

"I always wanted to make a better LP," interrupts Johnny, "write better songs, do bigger shows." By bigger, though, he doesn't mean Wembley Stadium. "Oh, I don't mean that big.

That’s not a gig, it’s an event. We just want to get bigger and better.” Johnny loves playing live, as does Billy. “That’s the root of all music, isn’t it? But we want to develop our studio skills as well.”

A few months ago, the London documentary South of Watford devoted a programme to BOHJ. In one of its most memorable sequences, the band were filmed playing one of their regular gigs at a sheltered house for the mentally handicapped. The sight of all the residents dancing is at first disturbing, then almost touching. After the programme was broadcast, inmates’ parents banned further performances. Billy and Johnny are understandably bitter. “The parents said, ‘Oh no, we don’t want *our* children to be seen on television’.” says Billy. “So that ended that. It was good going to the hospital. We got quite familiar with the patients. They don’t get any other entertainment.”

Johnny agrees. “It was great playing in front of a different audience, and it was a real challenge. And in the end we were playing there regularly. They were getting something out of it. Our trombone player’s a mental nurse,” he continues, “and our violin player’s an ex-mental nurse, who actually got sacked for taking the inmates down the pub one afternoon!” The pair laugh at the memory. But when we get onto the subject of the music media, our BOHJ representatives are understandably scathing.

“I don’t read the NME or Sounds,” scowls Johnny. “It’s all beyond me. I don’t listen to modern music, John Peel or anything. John Peel pisses us off, so does John Walters. They’re just jaded old has-beens who won’t play our records. They’ll play the latest Fall rip-off, and the latest New Order rip-off until the cows come home. But not if you do something that goes beyond it all.”

So why are the BOHJ kept off the airwaves? Billy has his own theory. “It maybe something to do with the media exposure: ‘Stop This Band’.” “We’ve had a lot of hysterical press, too,” continues Johnny, “people think we’re pretentious, which we’re not actually.” “They’re trying to make an enigma out of something that’s basically pretty simple,” explains Billy. “Trying to sensationalise it.”

Musically BOHJ have many influences. We won’t mention Kurt Weill, but Johnny does like Billie Holiday and “daft things like that. I like anything me, I just like music.” He rejects the argument that his songs are depressing. “Life is pretty sad, it’s fatal sometimes, it’s tragic, but it’s also very funny. There’s a lot of black humour in the songs if you listen closely. they’re hysterical and neurotic. But I’d never say depressing.”

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