



Imagine the Chieftains, New Victory Band, the Copper family, Brass Monkey, an early music group, a Turkish classical ensemble, etc., each piece being different one after the other, and that's what our gigs are like," Robert White said. "I know many people will find this hard to believe, but it is true." White was talking about the New Scorpion Band, without a doubt one of the most unusual groups on the English folk scene. Composed of woodwind player Brian Gulland, lead singer and squeezebox player Tim Laycock, string specialist Robin Jeffrey, violinist Sharon Lindo, and White, who plays all manner of bagpipes, flutes, and brass, the band is known for combining what is normally thought of as "folk" music with many other styles. This ensemble has been livening up arts

centers and concert halls around Britain and the world for more than 10 years.

I caught up with the New Scorpion Band by email; questions were forwarded around and answered by all the band members. One thing they agreed on: The key to the band's chameleon-like quality (which White referred to as "several bands in one") is to be found in their instrumental versatility. "Four of us can play over 30 instruments each," White explained, "although we usually average about 30 between us in each concert. We do not normally go out to include as many instruments as we can; the prime function is to serve the music or particular song. If we think that a particular instrumentation will help, we can use it. It is great to have the ability to do that, but sometimes we may use no instruments at

all! Or have a very plain arrangement that may complement the previous complicated one."

Robin Jeffrey went further. "We have all worked in many different musical fields, and prominent among these have been early and baroque music, the classical orchestra, and also the world of brass and wind bands," he said. "Bob trained as a trumpeter originally, and you hear that training in the brass arrangements he does for us. Brian, Sharon, and I are between us very experienced in the Renaissance and Baroque, and if you sometimes hear echoes of Purcell or Handel in a bass line or an inner part, that's not surprising."

With all this going on, NSB is not strictly a folk-revival band, as Jeffrey was quick to point out. "Of course, we are children of the revival ourselves, and we took our initial inspiration from the great names of that period. But we wanted to find an essentially British sound world, avoiding, for instance, the steel-stringed guitar, which is an American instrument." The band doesn't consider itself a "historical" band, and it's not trying to recreate specific historical periods or aim for complete authenticity. But, the members explained, they do want to base their interpretations on the sounds that would have been familiar to folk singers and musicians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the men and women who sang for great collectors like Cecil Sharp and Ralph Vaughan Williams. These sounds include, Jeffrey said, "the wind instruments of the local town band, the fiddle in the pub, the various regional bagpipes, and so on." In this context, the members of New Scorpion Band don't think that having classical influences or marching-band influences makes them any less of a folk-oriented group. "You have to bear in mind the long tradition of town bands and church bands," Jeffrey said. "In a place like Chester or Shrewsbury, as the farmer brought his goods to market, they may very well have been rehearsing the 'Messiah' in the town hall."

How did such an unusual band come about? It all began in the early 1990s, when the core of the original band — Laycock, Jeffrey, White, Gulland, and Colin Thompson — assembled in the studio on an album project, a Laycock solo album titled *The Upland Side*. "In 1993 I wanted to make a new recording of traditional and new songs with a West Country flavor," Laycock remembered. "I first asked Robin to help with arrangements and accompaniments on banjo, guitar, and English guitar. Then I rehearsed fiddle accompaniments in Dorset with Colin Thompson, and we set off to record the album at Bob's studio in Henfield, East Sussex. It soon became clear that some whistle and pipes would add greatly to the results, but that meant having another recording engineer while Bob was playing."

Both White and Jeffrey knew Brian Gulland from a stint with the National Theatre in 1984. Furthermore, Gulland was both a

professional producer/engineer and the closest thing to a rock star on the folk circuit: He had played in the 60s and 70s with English Baroque-rock pioneers Gryphon, and in the 80s he toured and recorded with French folk-rock band Malicorne. When asked about his influences, he casually remarked, "Listening back, my bassoon basslines on 'Lovell' owe a debt of gratitude to Chris Squire of the rock group Yes, from the time in Gryphon when we had a mutual admiration society going between the two groups." Clearly, both his technical and musical skills could be a help to the project. "I played sitting on the floor behind a sofa," Gulland remembered. "It was the only sound separation screen available at that time!"

The musicians quickly learned that the group could be more than the sum of its parts. They were excited to work together, and continue to be so today. Their comments on one another range from sweet to silly. So Laycock says of Jeffrey, "Ever since Robin and I first met in 1980, we have been on the same wavelength with British traditional music. Robin's subtle and thoughtful arrangements for instruments and voices, and his wonderful playing are central to what we do." Jeffrey says of White, "Bob White is the consummate craftsman. He can do a musical arrangement and then go away and make the instruments." Jeffrey also comments on his old friend Laycock, "I personally think Tim will never die; he will only sleep in a cave beneath the Dorset Downs, and when English folk music is facing its greatest threat, he will rise, concertina in hand." As for

Robert White and Sharon Lindo



Gulland, the band members agree: He's a little crazy, but he's one of the most amazing musicians they've ever encountered. Jeffrey offers this advice: "If you are ever driving around the mountains of North Wales with some bottles of wine in the car, find your way to Brian's farmhouse, open the bottles, and, around one o'clock in the morning, ask him to improvise on the organ. You will be astonished."

The songs from *The Upland Side* were the basis of the early repertoire of the New Scorpion Band. "For me," Laycock said, "that instrumental combination of whistle or pipes, squeezebox, fiddle, English guitar, and bassoon is the central sound of the New Scorpion Band." Lindo and Jeffrey hastened to mention Laycock's vocals and stage presence, as well. Lindo called Laycock a "great foreman for the group," and Jeffrey added, "Tim Laycock's

singing is the heart and soul of the band. It's the center of what we do. His voice has a very particular quality...an ability to convey his own profound connection with the songs and at the same time make them personal and relevant to widely differing audiences."

So the band had an unusual and compelling sound, a frontman with a strong personality, and several great musicians. But before it could play gigs, there remained an all-important step: naming the group. A local town band of the 19th century proved inspirational, as Laycock recalled. "The original Scorpion Band were four musicians in Dorset, circa 1815," he said. They played corneopane [an early cornet], trombone, clarinet, and bass drum, and operated in the Puddletown area just north of Dorchester. Although we can't be certain, the likelihood is that they were musicians formerly employed in one of the many bands that provided

later, the tune gave them the title of one of their albums.

Before embarking on a recording career, however, the band had to find some work. With its lineup and musical preferences, this could sometimes be a challenge. For a start, its wide range of instruments makes its live concert sound difficult to manage. "Getting the instrumental mix right is what the band is all about. We are well used to dealing with this particular challenge, but a challenge it is, and one which

Robert White as Admiral Lord Nelson



photos: Pete Burjham

changes with every venue we play," Jeffrey said. Although the band prefers to play acoustically, the members need to perform lengthy and complex sound checks to adapt their sound to the acoustics of the venue.

"Somebody is always playing up or down, or changing the direction of their instrument," Jeffrey explained. "It isn't only a matter of balancing the band, of course, but also of accompanying the voice and letting the words come through. So we are always making adjustments, and surprising ourselves. We have a very strong preference for playing without amplification, but when we have to use it, we take along our own sound engineer, who is familiar with the instruments and the mix."

Although they play every type of venue, from outdoor festivals to concert halls to tiny churches, there are some patterns to their experience as a working band. "The nearest thing to a bread-and-butter NSB gig would probably be an appearance on the Arts Centre circuit, in a mixed concert series, or a themed festival — historical or perhaps maritime," Jeffrey said. "It's a regular feature of the NSB's work that much of the time we are performing for non-folky audiences, and are therefore often playing for people who have never seriously considered folk music before, or even have a negative impression of it. The result is almost always very positive and very gratifying for us. We have always done a certain number of folk clubs and festivals, but folk venues haven't actually featured too heavily recently. We just play for the folk, where they live. It's an amazing feeling to arrive to play at a little place like Shipton Gorge, high on the hills above the Dorset

military and social music for the regiments encamped around Weymouth to repel invasion from France and to protect King George III on his frequent visits to the seaside."

Not much is known about the original Scorpion Band, but the scanty records are intriguing. "We do know that the Scorpion Band were rivals to the established Weatherbury Town Band and that their *piece de resistance* was 'The Downfall of Paris,' a tune with a fascinating history," Laycock said. A local band with a known repertoire that they could learn, and a known rivalry to make them seem human, was too much for the band members to ignore: The New Scorpion Band was born. They even adopted "The Downfall of Paris" as one of their favorite tunes. "Locally in Dorset, the march was known as 'The Downfall of Pears,'" Laycock explained. Several years

Tim Laycock



photos: Pete Burgham

crucial songs in the history of the band, and both still form part of the repertoire today.

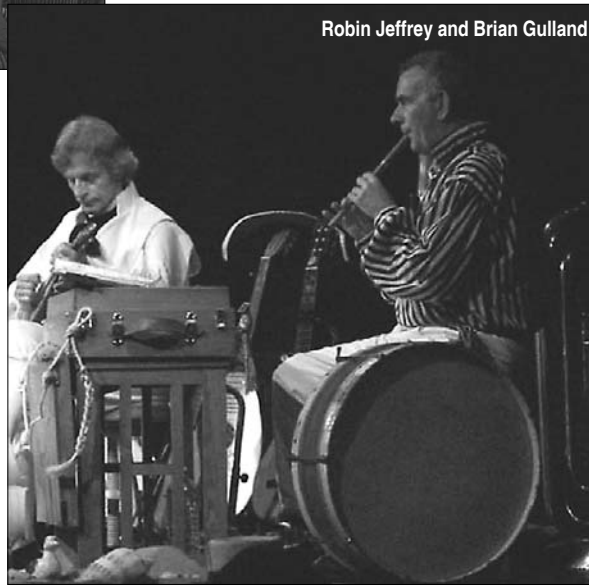
The band's second album, *The Plains of Waterloo*, focuses on music and song of the Napoleonic wars. The idea was conceived by White, who had had some experience with the Napoleonic era as both an actor and a musician. Indeed, White is well known for a character role in one of the wildly popular TV films starring Sean Bean as Wellington's favorite rifleman, Richard Sharpe. He was offered the job by his old friend, folksinger and actor John Tams, one of the music directors of the Sharpe

Coast, and realize that people are being turned away at the door."

After touring for a while, of course, a band needs some new material, and NSB is always adding to its stock of tunes and songs. Considering the rich sources available in books, recordings, and the folk scene, not to mention the band's own writing, finding material is never a problem. But arranging the material with its vast collection of instruments can be a challenge. The band starts with an almost limitless number of possibilities for instrumentation and narrows it down to a sound that works. "We are more or less completely pragmatic, mixing instruments according to what we think works musically. The first priority is always to get a blend that is right for the particular piece of music," Jeffrey said.

Lindo agreed. "Given the wide variety of instruments available to us, we try to find an instrumentation that brings out the character of each individual piece. I think that using the oboe for Irish reels, such as 'Ships are Sailing' and 'Out on the Ocean,' was particularly inspired."

After establishing and arranging a repertoire different enough from the *Upland Side* material, the New Scorpion Band set out to record its first album. That disc, which came out in 1999, was called simply *Folksongs and Tunes of the British Isles*. It immediately earned the group a reputation as an unusual and talented new band. "The breadth and variety that is included is staggering..." said the EFDSS magazine, which also went on to praise the band's "powerful group singing with tremendous accompaniments for the raucous; and sensitive well-crafted masterpieces for the discerning ear." Laycock said that two songs on that first album were particularly important. Jeffrey's vocal arrangement of "Row On," a whaling song found in Gale Huntington's book *Songs the Whalemen Sang*, and White's arrangement of "John Barleycorn" are both



Robin Jeffrey and Brian Gulland

series. "It seemed like the crazy sort of thing I ought to do, so I ended up playing the part of the pipe major in 'Sharpe's Rifles,'" he remembered, "and working with many actors previously known to me from the National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company." This connection with Sharpe and the Napoleonic wars has led to a following among historical re-enactors. As Jeffrey noted, "We like [re-enactors], particularly when they buy our records."

This brings us to another prominent aspect of the New Scorpion Band: its tendency to play in costume. This is not, the band members insist, an attempt to be historically accurate, except at a small minority of concerts. "Most of us have done a fair amount of costume work, historical presentations of various sorts at famous locations such as Hampton Court, Hatfield House, or Windsor Castle, and Sharon does a lot of work in the historical dance field. But none of this is 're-enacting,' just professional dressing up," Jeffrey said. "With the New Scorpion Band, we have no intention of dressing for a particular historical period, we just like to put on a show and give the audience their money's worth. After all, if you went to see an African band it would be disappointing if they all came on in jeans and T-shirts. So we like to go in for a bit of finery and give them

something to remember. Also, there is a deeper and more intangible point. Folk tradition is stretched very thin in England; it forms a very little part of most people's lives, and we often find that our performances somehow put people back in touch with that lost dimension. If our choice of dress helps to create an atmosphere, to reach out across the generations and perhaps make the boundaries of time and space wobble a bit, all well and good."

The theatrical background of many of the members contributes greatly to the band's stage shows. "We have all worked extensively in the theater, both at national and local levels, and having seen some of the world's greatest actors at work has helped us in our performances," White said. "We believe that musical performance should be and is theater. When people go out for a night's entertainment they want a complete show, a properly presented entertainment with variety, color, humor, tragedy, etc., and that's what we give them."

"We have all done a lot of theater in our careers, indeed that is how some of us met in the first place," Jeffrey agreed. "Tim has quite a number of acting roles to his credit, including Jesus in the *Passion*, Cecil Sharp, and William Barnes. Among us we have performed with many of the major British theatre companies, the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare's Globe, also extensively in Baroque Opera in Britain and overseas. So we are definitely stage creatures. Most directly relevant to the band is Tim's extensive knowledge of folk drama, which turns up in most of our performances these days."

The material the group performs around the holidays is particularly heavy on seasonal and ritual themes, and this spirit was captured on its third album, *The Carnal and the Crane*. It includes seasonal songs and tunes of all varieties, from well-known tunes like "Drive the Cold Winter Away" and "Christmas Day in da Morning" to carols such as "The Sussex Carol" and "The Wexford Carol." But it also includes some lesser-known songs, like the children's ditty "There Was a Pig" and the very merry ballad "The Christmas Goose," an unusual seasonal version of a widespread theme. When playing this repertoire, Jeffrey confided, "we travel round with not only our enormous instrument collection, but also all the necessary paraphernalia for St. George, Father Christmas, Lord Nelson and the Turkish Knight, and, most spectacular of all, our absolutely colossal Derby Ram."

Between the second and third albums, the band went through its only lineup change to date. Colin Thompson left, and was replaced by Lindo. She draws nothing but praise from her bandmates, and Laycock's comments are typical: "Sharon Lindo was our first-choice replacement for Colin. She brings superb fiddle and viola playing in a wide range of styles, and expertise on early instruments such

as curtal, rebec, and recorder.”

“She also shares the general band tendency to instrument proliferation,” Jeffrey added, “and it has been her strange and wonderful metamorphosis into a trombonist which has made all our recent brass arrangements possible.”

The brass arrangements certainly turn up on *The Downfall of Pears*, the group’s fourth CD. Indeed, the title track is played in pure brass-band style, giving a sense of what the original Scorpion Band might have sounded like.

As with its other records, the arrangements vary...the best example being an epic, 13-minute version of “Lord Bateman” containing both Turkish and Northumbrian tunes, each played with appropriate instruments. The band’s fifth and most recent album, *Out on the Ocean*, explores maritime themes with sea chanteys, naval ballads, and songs of the merchant sailor. It’s made up of the highlights of two of the stage shows, “Out on the Ocean”



Pete Burjham

Robert White, Sharon Lindo, Tim Laycock, Robin Jeffrey, Brian Gulland

and “Bold Nelson’s Praise.” The first is a general maritime show, while the other focuses on Nelson’s navy. “Maritime music represents a big part of New Scorpion Band performances,” Laycock explained, and the album was a way of recognizing that.

Themed albums and performances are also in the cards for the group’s immediate future, the members told me. “At present we are touring with our ‘John Barleycorn Is

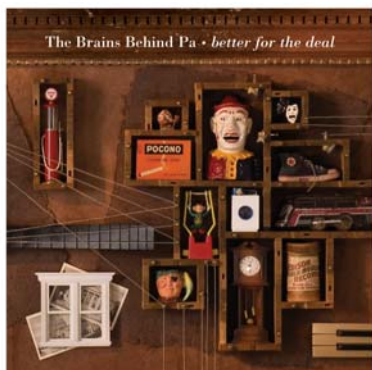
Dead’ program, which deals with rural life, farming, and the ritual year,” Jeffrey said. “This will form the basis of a CD, which we will record later this year. We are also putting together a new CD and concert program project on the subject of magic and the supernatural, which should see the light next spring.” All of this sounds fascinating, of course, especially the latter. Relatively little attention has been paid to supernatural songs and ballads in British traditional music, and a good album on that theme is always welcome.

Apart from that, Jeffrey joked, the band has no other plans. “If anyone has big plans for us, maybe a Hollywood movie,” he hinted, “I’m sure we have some dates available.” Until Scorsese calls, you can find them touring — mostly in England.

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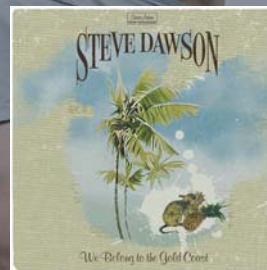


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