

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

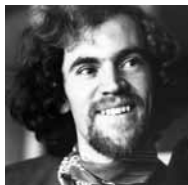
THE ALBION BAND

Tim Cumming examines the extensive history of the UK's most famous folk-rock outfit

With a musical cast that numbers at least 65 – among them John Tams, Phil Beer, Shirley Collins, Pete Zorn, Martin Carthy, Simon Nicol, Dave Mattacks, Thompsons Richard and Linda, Lal and Mike Waterson, and many, many more – The Albion Band is one of the most fluid units in folk and rock history, existing more in a quantum than a steady state, and with a 40-plus album catalogue.

“It was conceived as a band to go out on the road, to play specifically English music,” says founder and ‘guv’nor’, Ashley Hutchings, a key figure in early Fairport and Steeleye Span line-ups, and in British folk-rock.

The early line-ups never entered the studio; instead, floating Albion members John Kirkpatrick, Richard Thompson, Barry Dransfield, and Dave Mattacks joined Hutchings to release *Morris On* in 1972. The band’s ‘first’ album, *Battle of the Field*, with a line-up including Martin Carthy, Kirkpatrick and Simon Nicol, was cut in 1973, but not released until 1976, by which time, the band had changed radically. “In fact, the name was first used on the *No Roses* album [1971] that Shirley Collins made with me when we were husband and wife,” says Hutchings. “That was a big album and is still regarded as a classic, partly because of the massive cast list of musicians and singers, and also the folk-rock approach. It didn’t duplicate what



Above: Ashley Hutchings in 1969 as a member of Fairport Convention
Right: The Albion Band line-up in the mid-90s
Below: the 1997 line-up (left to right) Joe Broughton, Ken Nicol, Neil Marshall, Ashley Hutchings and Kellie White (front)



Right: From the *Grandson of Morris On* photo session, 2002



BRYAN LEDGARD

was on the Fairport or the Steeleye albums. It was very English. There was quite a strong Celtic influence on *Liege and Lief* and the early Steeleye albums.” The band even had its own Morris side – the Albion Morris Men. “We toured a lot of universities and colleges and young people seeing athletic, really good Morris dancing with an electric folk-rock band were blown away.”

Hutchings exchanged the Albion name for the Etchingham Steam Band in the mid-70s, before pulling together a sprawling band of players, including John Tams, and early musicians Phil Pickett and John Sothcott, for the traditional album, *The Prospect Before Us*. “Then I had this life changing phone call from [the National Theatre’s] Bill Bryden,” recalls Hutchings, “who said he wanted The Albion Band to provide music for *The Passion*, an updating of the medieval mystery plays.”

With their singular focus on English traditional music and dances, and an exploratory, pioneering interest in early music, The Albion Band were the perfect fit for the medieval mystery plays. It was at this point that The Albion Band “blossomed into this multifaceted grower – an idea, rather than just a band,” says Hutchings. “It happened very naturally. At the National Theatre, we needed different musicians for different productions, and because you were doing long runs, people weren’t available all the time. For *The Passion*, we had three female singers – Maddy Pryor, Peta Webb and June Tabor. One would do a few nights then someone else would come in. The whole thing changed and became something else. And because it did, I went with that and used the idea that a band could be more than just the same four or five people. It freed us. It freed me, to do whatever you wanted. And this went on for years.”

Television beckoned too, with a BBC documentary, *Here We Come A Wassailing* in 1977, and their own *Arena* profile following the huge success of 1978’s *Lark Rise to Candleford* show. “That was a heyday period – from 1977 to 1981,” says Hutchings. “Within that time, we were the darlings of the media, and we made *Rise Up Like The Sun* which was a massive success, and probably

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the most successful Albion album of all.”

The band continued to shape-shift through the 80s, a decade in which the political and cultural landscape shifted its weight to accommodate Thatcherism, the free market, and the beginnings of the globalised culture we know today. How has Hutchings’ idea of Albion changed since then? “The early albums were aggressively, bombastically English,” says Hutchings. “The likes of *Albion Sunrise* and *The New St George*. It was like, ‘Be Glad To Be English.’

What’s changed is that culture is much more cosmopolitan, and there’s no way we’d write a song like ‘The New St George’ now. It almost leaves a bad taste in the mouth, considering the far right and the imagery they use.”

In the early 90s, when Albion line-ups included Phil Beer, Julie Matthews and Chris While, among others, the band became one of the first to pioneer the ‘unplugged’ approach, with albums such as *Acousticity*. A larger line-up, incorporating two generations of musicians, toured and recorded between 1997 and 2002, after which Hutchings closed shop, in favour of the seasonal Albion Christmas Band and the occasional Christmas album. Then in 2011, Hutchings passed the mantle onto his son, Blair Dunlop. “Many people have said it would be great to reform the Albion band, and I’d always resisted it. I didn’t feel it was the right thing to do. Then I woke up one morning and it hit me – hand the band over to the next generation. If it’s worth keeping, then it’s worth passing on.”

The new Albion Band, with a fresh, six-strong line-up that features Katriona Gilmore on fiddle, released an EP, *Fighting Room*, with hard-rocking guitars kicking off John Tams’ opening rallying call from *Rise Up Like The Sun*, ‘Ragged Heroes’. “We want an edgy feel without alienating anyone or compromising what we feel is right,” says Blair Dunlop, who has just finished sessions for an album set to appear as the new, rebooted and suited Albion Band embark on a UK tour through March. “It’s great on a musical level to carry on what Dad had done. It’s lovely to be able to continue the tradition in the family.”

“They want to be true to the earlier Albion spirit,” adds Hutchings. “But I’m sure the cosmopolitan thing will shine through and I’m sure they will reflect what’s currently happening, as we did in the 70s.”

DATES *The new Albion Band tour the UK in March. See Gig Guide for details*



JAMES FRIGAN

BEST ALBUMS



No Roses (Pegasus, 1971)

The first recorded appearance of The Albion Band, with some 27 musicians including Richard Thompson, Maddy Prior and Nic Jones supporting Shirley Collins, then Hutchings’ wife, on one of her finest albums. ‘The Murder of Maria Marten’ is one of the finest tracks in the entire folk-rock genre.



The Prospect Before Us (Harvest, 1977)

With the band incorporating early music influences and a medieval Estampie dance on the tracklist, as well as two drummers, a Morris troupe live in the studio, and a wassailing song, this is the classic Albion Band sound, as the group entered its heyday.



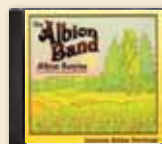
Rise Up Like the Sun (Harvest, 1978)

Perhaps the band’s finest moment, though the 2004 CD reissue is hard to find beyond the realms of mp3 downloads. Produced by Joe Boyd, and opening with John Tams’ superb ‘Ragged Heroes’, and it includes Richard Thompson’s brilliant ‘Time To Ring Some Changes’, and the 11-minute epic, ‘Gresford Disaster’, and a remarkable range of musicians and singers, including the McGarrigles and Linda Thompson.



Lark Rise to Candleford (Charisma, 1980)

Martin Carthy, Shirley Collins, John Kirkpatrick, John Tams and Martin Simpson are among the luminaries on this superb adaptation of Flora Thompson’s rural English memoir adapted for the stage by Keith Dewhurst



Albion Sunrise (HTD, 1999)

A double set of recordings compiled from Albion’s acoustic period, but with some gloriously powerful electric folk amid the 32 cuts, with musicians including Phil Beer and strong lead vocals traded between Gillie Nichols, Kellie While and Julie Matthews.

BEST COMPILATION



Vintage Albion Band (Talking Elephant, 2008)

The BBC Sessions is the must have, but it’s a collector’s item. *Vintage Albion Band On The Road* comprising three gigs from 1977, 1981 and 1982, is a strong runner-up, with some superb live versions of Albion favourites, including ‘The Gresford Disaster’. A career-long ‘Best Of’ is yet to come.

IF YOU LIKE THE ALBION BAND, THEN TRY... THE TRANSPORTS



A Ballad Opera (Free Reed)

For breadth, depth and drama, delivered by a mammoth line-up that’s the equal of the collected Albion Band line-ups, Peter Bellamy’s ballad opera is a gripping musical voyage to sit alongside *Lark Rise*. And Bellamy, like Hutchings, is a singular figure in post-war English folk music.