



→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

OYSTERBAND

They formed over 30 years ago and are still going strong. Tim Cumming takes a look at the enduring appeal of one of England's original folk-rock groups

When it comes to Oysterband, the group's sense of camaraderie and commitment is palpable, not only in the repertoire – a mix of gritty self-penned and traditional – but the philosophy behind it – a stiff measure of spirits in terms of life lived and political engagement, a commitment to climb into the skin of a song and animate it with a rollicking good time and as little divide between stage and audience as possible.

The band emerged from the cultural and political divides of the late 70s and early 80s when the folk scene was under duress, vilified, mocked and despised by the mainstream – a hatred that carried through to the early 90s, when popstalgia arrived,

and folk-rock could be seen as strange and pioneering rather than hippy vileness.

Out of that early 80s dry-ice fog of Thatcherite pop and New Romantic escapism came The Pogues, Billy Bragg, The Waterboys and Oysterband. They started off as a dance band – first Fiddler's Dram, then the Oyster Ceilidh Band – the Oyster introduced from gorging on *fruits de mer* at Whitstable.

The core line-up of guitarist Alan Prosser, fiddler Ian Telfer and singer-melodeon player John Jones was set early on, with bassist and cellist Chopper (Ray Cooper) arriving in 1988, after the band's CD debut for Cooking Vinyl. *Step Outside* featured a stand-out, hard-rock take on 'Hal-An-Tow', and 1987's *Wide Blue Yonder* included 'The Oxford Girl', a cover of Bragg's 'Between the Wars' and Kathryn Tickell as a guest.

At the beginning of the 90s, they made *Freedom and Rain* with June Tabor, a classic collection that made their name in the US, where the album tour saw queues forming round the block to see the English folk diva and band redefine songs ranging from the Velvet's 'All Tomorrow's Parties' to the more traditional 'Dives and Lazarus' and 'Dark Eyed Sailor'. That association, for both Tabor and the Oysters, would have a very long reach indeed. When, in 2011, they got back together to make *Ragged Kingdom*, they would make one of the finest ever folk-rock albums, which won them in total four awards at the 2012 Radio 2 Folk Awards.

In the early 90s, the music scene had rediscovered its sense of history, folk was no longer a four-letter word, and with the likes of The Levellers and, across the Atlantic

in Canada, Great Big Sea (who took their 'When I'm Up (I Can't Get Down)' and made it a hit), Oysterband were part of a vital, politicised folk culture, one embedded in the now, but with the depth and rich colour field of tradition. *Deserters*, a darker album than *Freedom and Rain*, merged rock, folk and a punk attitude, and featured protest songs that tackled the post-Cold War explosion of big, big business and the even bigger profit-before-everything motive that has worked so well for our global economy in recent years.

Great Big Sea and Chumbawamba joined in on *Here I Stand* at the end of the 90s, released on the band's own Running Man label, after parting from Cooking Vinyl, which would later release an authorised 'Best Of' double CD, *Granite Years: The Best*

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of 1986-1997. An earlier compilation set, *Trawler*, set the tone for the later *The Oxford Girl and Other Stories*, which saw the latest line-up pick up their acoustic instruments for a stripped-down tour through their catalogue. *Trawler's* reversions of everything from 'Hal-An-Tow' to New Order's 'Love Vigilante' makes it one of their more obscure but most delightful recordings.

In the 2000s the Oysters mounted The Big Session festival, at a time when British folk in all its forms had built a large, new and energetic audience. Since then, *Meet You There* has been lauded as their finest release, sporting a more acoustic approach, and presaging the acoustic backwards look of *The Oxford Girl*, and their triumphant reconnection with Tabor on *Ragged Kingdom*.

The album developed from a gig at the Roundhouse in January 2011. "It was so enjoyable, somebody said, 'let's do an album,'" recalls Tabor. "We'd all grown musically and it seemed a good idea to put that experience together and see what came out." What came out was a working list of 36 songs, whittled down to a final 12. The likes of 'Bonny Bunch of Roses', fitted with a rockabilly riff that would grace any good Fall album, or the intense emotiveness of 'Fountains Flowing', a hair-raising duet between Tabor and Jones, drawn from the traditional 'A Blacksmith Courted Me', are special indeed. "I've always wanted to do that song," says Jones. "There's a sad parting at the heart of it – a young man going off to war, he sees adventure, and she sees only grief. That's a contemporary experience a lot of people go through." And it's that mix of the contemporary with the tradition that runs so vividly through Oysterband's history. And yes, they have come up with some pearls. **N**

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PODCAST Hear Tim Cumming and music from Oysterband on this issue's podcast

DATES See the Gig Guide for tour dates

BEST ALBUMS



June Tabor and The Oyster Band, *Freedom and Rain* (Cooking Vinyl, 1990)

The first pairing of June Tabor and the Oysters brought us startling, spine-tingling reversions of the Velvet Underground, Richard Thompson and Shane McGowan.



Oysterband, *Trawler* (Cooking Vinyl, 1994)

A set of re-recorded highlights from their Cooking Vinyl catalogue. This album's version of 'Hal-An-Tow' sounds like Hawkwind on mushrooms and speed at the site of The Wicker Man.



Meet You There (Westpark Music, 2007)

Recorded in a village hall in Herefordshire, sporting the big, broad anthemic feel and with songs such as 'Over the Water' and 'Here Comes the Flood', and its theme of globalisation and climate change, this is an album with a salty, epic reach. Reviewed in #44.



The Oxford Girl and Other Stories (Running Man Records, 2008)

Like *Trawler*, but minus the amplifiers, this acoustic set looks back over the band's catalogue and delivers fine new versions of 'The Oxford Girl', 'Put Out the Lights', and their hit song for Great Big Sea, 'When I'm Up (I Can't Get Down)'.

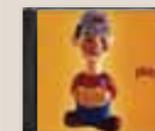


Ragged Kingdom (Topic, 2011)

Back with June Tabor and a fabulous set of traditional songs, alongside a spectral 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', songs from PJ Harvey and Shel Silverstein and Bob Dylan's 'Seven Curses' with a driving cello riff that takes its protagonist, the judge, all the way down to the pit. A Top of the World review in #79.

IF YOU LIKE OYSTERBAND, THEN TRY...

GREAT BIG SEA



Play (Cooking Vinyl, 1997)

Newfoundland's finest, purveyors of Newfie songs and shanties to which the island's French, Irish and English heritage clings like a limpet. This 1997 album features Oysterband's 'Can't Get Up', REM's 'End of the World' and a great shanty version of 'General Taylor'.