

## **Nick West, Bucketful of Brains, February 2018**

The North London bluegrass rebels Foghorn Leghorn hole up in the loose environs of Stoke Newington, Finsbury Park, Green Lanes and the Haringay Ladder. Presenting as a band of insurgents raging against the dying of the light, shouting defiance at a world gone wrong, and keeping faith with the spirit of punk and Lemmy Kilmister, they'll then surprise you with considered songs of tenderness and consolation.

Every month they venture into Clerkenwell and raise a bit of hell in The Betsey Trotwood at their My Grass Is Blue night, when they'll pull in guests from across the spectrum, defying all conventions of musical purity, and as importantly giving public run-outs to the music they've been working up at Chris Clarke's Reservoir Studios.

The band took shape back when banjoist Tim Kent, up from East Sussex, connected with mandolinist Eamonn Flynn in The Hare And Hounds on Holloway Road, and fiddle-player Paul Fay in Molly Malones. Tim had played in Squeal Like A Pig with his childhood pal, guitarist Del Brooks, and would meet doghouse bass-player Chris while playing with The Rockingbirds. The line-up completes with inscrutable dobro-master Uncle Kevin O'Neill, who sits like Buddha while the rest shout the odds, and then shuts them all up with his playing. They've now been Foghorn Leghorn for somewhere north of a quarter of a century.

They'll define themselves in all manner of ways: "We're a string band that plays bluegrass music... like heavy metal". "We play the right instruments but the wrong tunes." "I think there's an irreverence, we like to pretend we don't give a toss." "I don't see why we're not bluegrass, but we're not traditional." And while once they may have had a reputation more as interpreters, these days there's a rich vein of original material they've been busy mining. 2013's Not Before Time was all band-written, and the same is true with All At Sea.

They'll give you various explanations for this. Chris claims: "About five years ago we had a night of it at Glastonbury, got lost in a field and reinvented ourselves", though Eamonn has it: "As we've all got older and nearer to death our shit started to ooze out. Songs and stories get more personal and more heartfelt, and as a band we've become less whacky and sensational", and Del: "In getting through mid-life, having families and all that, the band has been a therapeutic think-tank for all of us. We've all, to a greater or lesser extent, had crises, and it's had an impact on our songwriting".

Certainly they've been writing a hell of a lot of songs, particularly Eamonn; Paul states outright: "He's a very prolific songwriter, and we're a vehicle for his very beautiful songs". It's clearly become very important, almost existentially so, to preserve them. "We have all these great songs, too many to put on an album, but we needed to look at them and see what we had. It's a particularly opportune time as there's a lot of tumult, globally, domestically, in our lives, macro-cosmically. Plus

we're aware of hitting mid-life, and we want these down for posterity.”

Thus *All At Sea*: the title reflected in Frank Burgess' illustration for the album's cover: a ship of fools run aground, with Theresa May, Donald Trump, all the devils out of hell, and the band. “That's us as a band. We're a bit of a shambles, but we get to our destination somehow. We've got no one leading us.”

Of course this isn't quite the case, as Del concedes: “We rehearse quite a lot. We work at things. There'll be a song completed, and it's quite quick from bringing it to the table to playing it. Here's the chords, here it goes, give it a bash. In that way we're quite DIY. Once we start playing it, we're all chipping in. We chat a lot about the songs. Someone'll be concerned with structure, someone with tone, someone with accuracy, someone with feel. Somebody's usually keeping order a bit, over the melee of different views.”

Someone is keeping order, and someone's producing, Chris and Kevin as it turns out, and the clarity, the rush, and the contrasts are a joy. From the rousing statement of intent that is opener ‘All That Remains’ (“Ill winds may be blowing but we're all that remains”) all the way through to the communal croon of ‘Moving Along’; book-ending songs about carrying on both hopefully and even optimistically despite the world, life, and its depredations.

London is the setting for ‘Love And Money’ a tale of hustling in-comers mirroring the speed and fragmentation of the capital. This is where Foghorn come from, a city that's always in your face, so as Eamonn notes “it's easy to just go around the corner and you can observe all human life on Green Lanes”.

Opposed to that is the ‘East Sussex rural madness’ of Tim's ‘Mad Jack Fever’. Both Tim and Del grew up deep in the countryside and recall the local characters; folk infamous for their habits. Jack's a woodcutter who speeds around the country lanes in his 4 x 4 impressively ignoring the safety of other people, and the song speaks to that rural aggression.

The ominous intro to ‘Whale Bone’ leads into a subject close to home for the London-Irish contingent in Foghorn; the bone being the ferula the Christian brothers used to punish schoolchildren. It's a lovely conceit, talking to the stick, saying “I bet you never thought you'd be used to beat someone like me”.

More personal matters arise in ‘Man I Want To Be’, stemming from Eamonn's thoughts watching his son swimming in the sea on the Norfolk coast. Its vibe is exotic, and, with the “blue salt waters calling me”, carrying suggestions of both Ronnie Lane, and The Arlenes' ‘Springboard’. That could be seen as an escape which is clearly a part of ‘Premonition Blues’, where fears for the future posit a retreat to rural Cork.

If there's a political sub-text, in Paul's 'The Whole World (In His Tiny Little Hands)' it becomes overt, though highlighting the absurdity rather than preaching: "I wrote this the night before we recorded it. Donald Trump, Brexit, the refugee crisis; all those things were going around my head; and it came out as humour. I'm trying to tell a shit story but have a laugh about it".

With romance ('Spanish Champagne'), lust ('Beginning To Hurt'), mortality ('Warning Signs'), and then madness - in 'Fundamental Breakdown', pretty much what it calls itself, and a pun to boot - also addressed, all human life is here.

Foghorn Leghorn may do their best to have you believe they're a bunch of guys getting together, having a few beers, a bit of fun, a play, and a laugh; it's true but from that a lot more evolves. All At Sea lets you see that lot more; an album of inspired playing, by turns thoughtful and wild, its emotions running deep, and its rewards plentiful.