

# JON BODEN

*Jon Boden's trophy cabinet is getting a tad heavy with all those BBC Folk Awards; with a new album, the former Bellowhead frontman may need to visit the furniture store...*

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

**H**e's certainly kept us waiting, but Jon Boden is back with new solo album *Afterglow*. The record follows 2009's *Songs From The Floodplain*, which explored the idea of how society might survive in a post peak-oil world.

Featuring former Bellowhead members amongst his Remnant Kings band, it will be the second in a trilogy of albums based around the narrative.

Whilst *Songs From The Floodplain* told the story of a rural post peak-oil community, *Afterglow* is set in an urban street festival – a scene of decaying buildings, burning oil drums and homemade fireworks – in which two lovers are trying to find one another.

The inspiration for the album came in part to Boden's involvement with the *Dark Mountain Project*; a collective of creatives who produce contemporary art and literature which reflects the current upheaval in ecological, economic and sociopolitical issues.

However, it is the 'post' part of 'post-apocalyptic' writing that has informed Boden's explorations; focussing on the positives of what things we might regain that have been lost in the melée of 21st century modernity – not just the negatives.

Featuring the playing of former Bellowhead members Sam Sweeney (drums) and Paul Sartin (oboe and fiddle), alongside the bass playing of Ben Nicholls (Seth Lakeman, Martin Carthy, Cara Dillon), *Afterglow* fuses traditional and modern sounds fantastically.

*Acoustic* caught up with Boden weeks before the album's October release.

## **So, tell us about the new record...**

Its subject matter is more urban and that is reflected in sound. There's still a lot of acoustic guitar, but this has more electric

guitar, strings, and brass, which I didn't have so much of on the last album. Sonically, it's quite Bellowhead, but it doesn't sound like Bellowhead because it's all my own songs and the way it's come together is quite different.

## **When are you planning to release the third installment?**

I've just started writing, but I'm not sure how long it'll take me. There probably won't be so much of a gap this time.

## **You're touring throughout November. What do you enjoy most about the road and what do you find the hardest?**

In terms of personal enjoyment, I'm looking forward to doing some more after-show sessions, which is something we established with Bellowhead, where we go to a pub nearby after the gig and play some folk tunes. We invite the audience along and that's always really fun; a great way to wind down after the gig. I'm looking forward to seeing how the new material works onstage too. It's not really until you perform songs live that they come alive. What's hardest? Sleeping! It's difficult being away from home too and not seeing the kids. But I'm hoping the family will come and see a gig this time.

## **You're something of a multi-instrumentalist. Give us a quick rundown of what you play...**

In order of ability, I'd say fiddle, guitar, piano, concertina. Those four are my main ones. I play bits and bobs of other things. I suppose I'm alright at folk wind stuff, I play bagpipes and can play tin whistle.

## **You're a big fan of the open tunings too...**

I am! I generally play, bottom to top, Bb, E, B, E, B, E, but then I half capo the top five strings, so you end up with sort of open B flat

chords. That's my main tuning these days.

## **How did you first get into playing music?**

I learned classical guitar from about five. Then as a teenager, I got an electric guitar and started playing in rock bands. I was really keen to play rock guitar, as most teenage boys are. That's until I got into folk music, aged 13 or 14. Listening to Jethro Tull led me onto Fairport Convention, then Martin Carthy. From rock, to folk-rock, to folk.

## **When did you first start writing and interpreting songs?**

I remember writing songs in the first few weeks of secondary school, aged 11, after finding some other people who were into music. Nothing that you'd want to listen to... [laughs]. That was consistent until I got really into folk music, about 17. At that point I stopped writing songs because I got more interested in interpreting traditional songs. Including *Folk Song A Day*, I've released about 60 albums of traditional songs, whereas I've only written three albums of my own songs. So it's certainly been skewed to traditional interpretations so far, but I do feel like I'm entering a songwriting phase at the moment.

## **Were your parents musical?**

They were musical, but we weren't particularly a musically-active family. My dad played piano and I remember playing stuff with him at home. I never went to a folk club until I was 21. But, yeah, my dad was musical and my mum has a cool record collection, that sort of thing.

## **It's over a year now since you left Bellowhead. Any regrets down the line?**

I think it was definitely the right call and I don't have any regrets about it. That's not to say I don't miss it, I do absolutely, and knew



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I would when I made the decision. I loved it. The last tour, in particular, was just fantastic. Incredible fun but also quite moving. Just a really lovely experience. Yeah, so I miss it, all the time really. I think we all do. The way everyone in the band is doing so many brilliant different things already demonstrates why it was time for us all to move on.

**Any chance of a reunion down the line?**

Sam [Sweeney] and Paul [Sartin] are in the Remnant Kings. I think John [Spire] and I will

work together as a duo again at some point. We need to get together and work out some new material. Bellowhead reunion: not likely. For one, it’s quite difficult getting 11 people together in the same room at the same time. But, also, because the final Bellowhead tour was so special, it was such a brilliant way to leave it. We’re all mates still, so it’s not out of the question, by any means, but unlikely.

**What has been the highlight of your career so far?**

**GEARBOX**

I’ve recently got my first luthier-built, custom made guitar. It’s a baritone acoustic built by Alan Arnold at Palladium Guitars, which is quite a beast, because I tune that down so the lowest string is low E, which is as low as a bass guitar. Then it’s tuned to Bb, F, Bb, F, Bb, which I half capo. It’s a 29” scale length and has some pretty hefty strings on it. I’ve also got a Martin 000X1AE. I have an arch top by Washburn J600, which is my only ever freebie, actually, I was given that by the kind people at Sound Technology. I play the Washburn through a Fender Blues Deluxe amp.

The last few Bellowhead tours. It was a great privilege to be playing in front of thousands of people. Every night I was aware of how lucky I was to be doing it.

**Tell me about the songwriting process for you?**

I don’t tend to write very much unless I have a particular task at hand. I’m not the sort of person who has songs just popping into mind. I have to have a thing which I’m working towards, which, I guess is why I write concept albums. I make myself sit down and think ‘What song do I need to write now?’. It’s generally lyric-led; getting the right kind of phrase that’s at the heart of the song. The melodies kind of get built into the lyrics. But I do also write riff-based stuff sometimes, where I come up with something by mucking about on the guitar and then write a lyric to fit.

**We’re always keen to get some artist recommendations. Anyone floating your boat right now?**

Jack Rutter, he’s a fantastic guitarist and singer. He’s got a new album, which is great. I’ve been enjoying Eliza Carthy and Wayward Band. But mostly I’ve been listening to Arcade Fire’s new album, which is excellent.

**Any advice for people reading?**

I’d certainly recommend people try out open tunings. It amazes me how nervous people are about trying them. Which is a shame, because it’s a whole different side of the instrument that you’re just not getting. Martin Simpson’s tuning, for instance, creates such a rich sound that you just cannot get with regular tunings. I’d really encourage people to experiment with open tunings. ■

**Afterglow is out now on Hudson Records.  
Info: [www.jonboden.com](http://www.jonboden.com)**