

NEW MUSIC

A chorus for us

The Union Choir's musicians are a confederation of like minds, as Ian McCabe learns

According to The Union Choir's Jon Melvin, the success of his band has been one big happy accident. It's an accident that has managed to spawn two well received singles, national radio attention and two sell out dates at The Sage Gateshead. Not bad for a band that has, as Jon comments, "no idea what it's doing".

The exact details of the band's formation have been lost due to time or one too many gins, but it began at a house party in 2009 when singer Jon met Grant Lagan and the two soon began writing and recording together. Roll forward to the present day and The Union Choir is now made up of nine eclectic musicians, playing anything from guitar and keyboard to saxophone and cello.

The band have a supporter in BBC Radio 6 presenter and North East music enthusiast Tom Robinson, who collaborated with them on his hit '2-4-6-8 Motorway' at last year's Newcastle Transmission event.

"It was very strange," laughs Grant, 25. "Being a bass player, he was really

focusing on Pete who plays bass for us and actually kept screaming 'push the fourth note' at him."

"But that's how you make it, you have to be passionate," adds Jon, 29. "He's spot on, though. I can't say enough about him and what he's done for the region."

Lyricaly, their songs may take inspiration from deliberately ambiguous personal experiences or films from the Soviet era of the 1920s, such as *Battleship Potemkin*.

I had to ask, though, how do they structure a song with so many instruments? "The writing of the songs actually starts very individually and then expands organically," says Jon.

"Jon is the primary song writer," adds Grant. "He'll bring the song to me and Martin, the guitarist and then the three of us will work on the medley and so on. Then we'll take that to the other band members and it'll just grow naturally."

"It works that way because Grant and I are terrible to be around when

we're working out the structure of a song," continues Jon. "The less people the better in that kind of atmosphere. You can't have these really talented musicians who play delicate string instruments sitting in when you're trying to work out how fast the song is, where the changes will be, the tone and so forth."

"So initially we try to keep it as limited as possible and then see what happens next. But sometimes it just happens naturally in rehearsal too."

Amazingly, despite the sum of their parts, The Union Choir have managed to avoid sounding cluttered and boisterous. "Because we have so many members, we obviously look quite big," explains Grant. "But I guarantee you that we



make a hell of a lot less noise than a band with two guitarists."

"We've been very conscious of that," adds Jon. "If you have a cello or clarinet on stage or on an album, you should use it only when it's really needed because it's such a beautiful instrument. That mentality has bled into how we approach where the bass, piano go too."

"We're always terrified about over-egging the pudding, which is crazy considering there are nine of us," Jon continues. "But the main thing that always pops up in a rehearsal is, 'there's too much going on, let's try to draw it in a little bit'. Subtlety is what we're all about and the more you push things, the more you lose, and at the end of the day the song needs to remain central."

For a large group, whose livelihoods range from law firm administration to health care, managing to get everyone in the same place at the same time, surprisingly isn't too much of a challenge.

"We try not to think about it," laughs Jon. "But I think we're crazy. Whatever we're doing, though, we're doing it right."

The Union Choir are part of Evolution Emerging alongside Hyde and Beast and Vinyl Jacket at The Sage Gateshead on June 1, www.theunionchoir.com



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