

*Interview:* Blanketman – Olivia Stock

**Olivia Stock talked regional escapism, jangle pop, and the Mancunian way with Adam Hopper, the affable frontman of Manchester's new wave five-piece, Blanketman.**

In a year that put a screeching halt to gigging culture and robbed dozens of emerging bands of their big break, it would have been easy for a band like Blanketman to fade into obscurity. Fortunately, this Manchester outfit have all the ingredients for lasting intrigue: a bulging back pocket of unabated, anecdotal songs that satisfy both brain and feet, a masterminded trove of indelible melodies, and no adversity to a bit of industry-cracking sweat and toil.

Over the last year or two, the band have spearheaded a burgeoning Manchester scene and have gigged extensively throughout the city, performing their cerebral brand of jangle pop to anyone who'll listen. "The truth is though, none of us are actually from Manchester," lead singer Adam Hopper laughs, "actually, I tell a lie – we have a member who's from Burnley, which is just off Manchester, but he's a more recent addition!"

No bigger surprise than to Hopper himself, Blanketman are one of joinmyband.com's only success stories. "I posted an ad in 2017 with very little hope of anything coming from it," he laughs. "It's kind of like a lonely hearts forum for musicians, not particularly glamorous!" A dingy final year at uni in Reading had left the singer longing for the cheap pints and crisp water of the North, whilst bassist Jeremy took the sentiment even more seriously, moving all the way from France's Southern border. "I think we all had a romantic view of the Manchester music scene," Hopper admits, "but luckily that didn't get us into any trouble. I spoke to Dan (guitarist) a bit before I got to Manchester and we agreed that we'd meet up for a pint once we both got there. The week after, Jeremy (bassist) came round to mine for a cuppa," he grins, "and we all just clicked straight away." Not yet entrenched in the city's music scene, finding a drummer took a little leg work, but eventually student and rhythmist Ellie-Rose Elliott completed the set.

Their usual haunt fast became The Peer Hat – an underslung sprouting ground for local musicians that billeted Blanketman's first gig after bassist Jeremy Torralvo-Godoy drunkenly asked the owner for a slot. "It's the kind of place that will give a new band with no demos or experience a gig," Hopper nods, "so it holds a bit of a special place in our heart." He continues thoughtfully: "I think there's a tendency in Manchester unless you're going to regular gigs and seeing small bands, to say that it's not as good as it used to be. But I think those people just aren't looking hard enough – they aren't going to The Peer Hat!"

Whilst Blanketman's compositions are, for the most part, short, sweet, and not here to wait around – their seven-track EP is just shy of twenty minutes – the band's approach to industry prosperity couldn't be more different. Alongside local hotshots like Document, Slow Knife, and MOLD, the band have "gigged, gigged, and gigged some more," establishing themselves as mainstays on the Manchester live circuit. "We mainly concentrated on building our live show because we were always more interested in that side of things," Hopper admits, "so we didn't actually put anything out for nearly two years." Finding a manager in Mike Hosker and an eventual label signing with [PIAS] provided a newfound sense of focus for the band. "He was like, 'this is all great, but like, direction?'" the frontman laughs, "so we started putting a bit more of a plan together, putting some more songs out, and slowly getting more high-profile gigs and support slots."

Tackling only life's biggest questions – is it too middle class to join the National Trust? Is the North really superior to the South? And should you ever leave your dog in the car? – the sardonic newbies quickly distinguished themselves from many of their more po-faced peers. In March of last year, *Taking You With Me* set the ball rolling and served up the band's first proper slice of industry pie. A trill, funk-infused number that navigates the angst of aging with a dead-pan smirk, it quickly pegged a Next Hype slot from Jack Saunders on BBC Radio 1, as well as a Ones To Watch 2020 pick from Huw Stephens. "It kind of

sustained us a bit, I think,” Hopper notes. “It was something going out into the world while nothing was happening, and off the back of it, we got that bit of press which was really cool.”

Keen to keep the flame alight, Blanketman spent lockdown releasing a littany of joyously simple and endlessly listenable singles that culminated in the debut EP, *National Trust*. Inspired by a bourgie birthday gift given to Hooper’s girlfriend by her parents, it’s a blissful but profound seven-track jaunt full of snapshot lyrics filtered through a quintessentially humorous northern lens. “The EP’s a bit of an anomaly,” Hopper smiles. “*Beach Body* was the only song written before lockdown, so we’ve never actually played any of those songs live.” He feigns a look of horror before bursting into laughter.

Despite the sordid absence of stage time, *National Trust* is drenched in the kind of incessant, do-it-yourself groove you could expect from a Blanketman live set. Somehow managing to recall PiL and Franz Ferdinand while sounding distinctly of the moment, it’s a real feat of blended influences and collaborative songwriting in a disparate era. “I think when you play a song live, you get a real sense of whether it works or not. It can be really telling,” the frontman explains. “Because we didn’t have the luxury of that this time around, we recorded the EP completely live. I think that captures us really well.”

A thematic obsession with train rides and regional escapism anchors a lot of the instrumental output, including the wonky and wordy *Harold*, and leading single *Beach Body* which dials up the urgency. “While we never set out to write a lockdown EP, I think a lot of the tracks kind of link indirectly with themes of being boxed-up and trapped, and a bit anxious,” Hopper muses. When four walls and his new lockdown cat became the extent of inspiration, he admits the creative process felt like “getting blood from a stone.” “Our lyrics are typically very observational, very anecdotal, so we had to really re-jig the way we approached songwriting,” he notes. “Luckily, I think in the two years that we’d spent gigging and fine-tuning, our songwriting had got better and better so we were able to put our best foot forward.”

In life’s cruel way, Blanketman have also been thrust their fair share of steps back, performing their biggest live show to date at a sold-out Manchester’s YES just a week before the premier lockdown. “We kind of reached a pinnacle where we could very easily disappear into nothingness if we didn’t capitalize on the little bit of attention we’d started to gather ourselves,” Hopper jests. The frontman shares his songwriting plaudits with guitarist Daniel Hand, and quickly their contrasting yet complementary styles became vital in maintaining the outfit’s sonic momentum.

The Hopper-penned *Blue Funk*, with its aery overtones and thesaurus-acquired name, sees the vocalist channel David Byrne with startling success. “I do quite like to put a bit of humour into songs,” he begins, professing a recent fondness for the deadpan musings of Leeds-favourite’s Yard Art, “but it’s good to be serious sometimes.” Unfortunately (*or not so*), Hand missed the memo on *Beach Body* – a beguiling disco-inspired hit dedicated to the ailing Brit-abroad. “After a troubled lost summer, we felt we needed a new advert for British exceptionalism,” Hopper laughs. It opens their live sets, and it’s easy to see why.

Not to be sniffed at, *Dogs Die In Hot Cars* is a humdinger of a reminder to lockdown pooch purchasers. Hopper’s croons of “wind down the windows, please let him out” cut through a careening guitar line, gloriously addictive and brilliantly bonkers in equal measure, and quickly become a canny metaphor for a locked-up year. Though the pair make a dreamy songwriting duo, of course, it’s not always sunshine and rainbows, and even the best of friendships come with their rough patches.

“Writing and working in such close proximity with your bandmates can be quite intense, so for us, that live release is super important.” A release. That’s what their music is to them. An outlet for all kinds of frustrations and anxieties in an ailing era. “We’re all quite strong characters, and we all have strong opinions on music and the band and stuff... when we’re on stage together, it kind of brings everything back to earth.”

Speaking just a day after pubs re-opened their doors to the pint-parched English public, it seems normalcy might just be on the horizon for Blanketman. “Dan bunked with his parents back in Reading for most of lockdown but we’re back rehearsing properly now,” Hopper grins. “Hopefully he’ll be moving back to Manchester the next couple of weeks. Our sound just isn’t the same without his... let’s say, intrusive guitar work. You never really know where a song’s going to go if he’s not playing on it.”

The real rapture of Blanketman is this prevailing sense of camaraderie. Their themes might hurtle from South-slandering to sleep paralysis, and right back again, but a group of commandeering young musicians remain firmly at the helm. “All of us are always pulling in different directions, but when we come together, I think we get something pretty cool,” the frontman rounds up with a grin. “I can’t wait to be back on stage where we belong.”

For Hopper, whip-smart and pragmatic, that’s all Blanketman can hope for at the minute. Their bourgeoisie-bashing brand of jangle pop has endured, if not excelled, in a grim year, and the road to recovery looks more like a train track with every passing minute. All aboard, indeed.

## **Olivia Stock**

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