

Last Town Chorus

The Last Town Chorus (www.thelasttownchorus.com) lives in Brooklyn, New York. Comprising **Megan Hickey**, voice and lap steel guitar and **Nat Guy**, acoustic guitar, their sound is as sparse as that line-up suggests, and yet almost mesmeric in the soundscapes created. Whatever your preconception of electric lap steel guitar, prepare to hear something new and haunting on their eponymous first album. The Village Voice described the music as "Moody, warm like old-fashioned lemonade spiked with LSD... a good example how minimal can be used to create multiple sounds." They're heading for Europe in March and **Barry Jones** spoke to Megan in Brooklyn and talked about the music and their plans. *Interview date 13 February 2004*



Hello Megan, your sound comes predominantly from the lap steel guitar, although not really how I've heard it before. It's fairly unusual, and especially so for a woman as well, how did you take it up?

The first time I even saw a lap steel was when I met my band mate. We started a band, knew what I wanted to sound like, he brought over an old lap steel that he had from the Fifties, and tried it out, and plugged it into delay pedals, and just knew that it was the magic ingredient to achieve the sound that I was looking for, and fell in love with it, so...

It all sounds very serendipitous; what's your musical background? Have you ever strummed guitar and sung in coffee bars prior to that, or was it total serendipity?

It was absolutely serendipity. I've been a music fan forever, and had other instruments y'know played bass a little bit, played along with Jimi Hendrix records, and stuff like that. And when I wanted to start the band I didn't have any notion of it having a lap steel, but once I heard it, it was really quite magical. I immediately started writing. I really hadn't written music before that, and who can say? I don't understand any of it, but it's pretty amazing to me, 'cause I can't imagine playing anything else now. It is strange being a woman playing it because, usually, you see kinda Nashville, straight country Nashville guys playing, y'know, country licks on it, and it's... I definitely don't do that.

I don't see any reason why women can't play it, it's just that I haven't seen anybody doing it before.

No I haven't either. I haven't seen a woman pedal steel player, a normal steel player, I've never seen a woman lap steel player. I think it's a bit... physically there's a strange reaction, when we play live, I think people are a bit startled because I'm playing a lap steel, and I'm manhandling it and I'm ...it's the way that it sounds through the effects that we use that really has a kind of strange transfixing effect to me, y'know, so...

It's not dissimilar in playing position from an Appalachian dulcimer really is it? Like Joni Mitchell plays.

Well a dulcimer is acoustic, a lap steel is electric, so it really has a grit to it and an intensity more like an electric guitar.

Yeah I wouldn't compare the sounds at all, they're different contexts.

Yeah they're definitely... it's physically the same, with raised strings and that kind of thing.

You mentioned before that the discovery of the lap steel had prompted you to write prolifically. Is that still continuing? And you did say you couldn't imagine playing another instrument?

Y'know, I have guitars, I have a bass, I mess around on them, but... occasionally I'll start songs on keyboard or guitar, but it's...there's nothing... it just hooks into what I feel so perfectly. I just... I can't imagine really getting to the guts of a song without it.

I do like the sound, it's really interesting. Although it's country, in the background it has what I'd consider to be a very ethereal urban feel to it.

Yeah it does. I guess that when I...I had a picture of the band before I knew how we would make it... How we would create the sound...? I don't know any other instrumentation that could bring me to that place. It's just because it's swirling, but it's gritty at the same time, y'know, sometimes it's distorted and it's just...it's really versatile and really, kind of, oceanic in the sound that it makes, and yeah, I love it.

It may be a little trite, but it sounds to me like it has a sort of New York sound, oddly enough. Do you think that there's anything about the place where you write that has influence on it?

Yeah, the second song on the album, the whole album is so much about New York and Brooklyn, and that transplantation of feeling that people moving from...moving to cities, and living life in cities, and it's just such a...I guess that's where I see country intersecting with music. I think country's...it seems to have an organic relationship to music, about places and music, about life and places, and you're absolutely right, that...Last Town Chorus is, to me, even the name of the band, the idea that it's urban music, but it's country in the sense that it's really about the experience of a place. Y'know, the second song on the album is called "Dear City" and it's really a hymn to the city, and that's how it feels to me, the album feels kinda like a sort of gritty, urban, country hymnal I guess.

I felt that its simplicity gives it a very sophisticated feel, which is very appealing.

Thanks, we've actually been...we made the first album pretty early, while it was fresh, but lately we've been playing with ...tomorrow night, for example, we're playing a pretty big show in New York at the Bowery Bar for Valentine's Day. We're playing as a four piece, with a drummer, but the drummer's...interestingly enough the kind of drumming that we hear for the music is really not country, it's more sort of classical, orchestral, y'know, lots of sort of swells, and thudding in the right places.

Timpani type stuff?

Yeah he uses a tom almost like timpani, so I don't think it takes away from the simplicity, I just think it gives it more range. The next album we'll be playing, probably as a basis, as a four piece, rather than two people with some add-ons. The last album was two people plus some add-on upright bass, and organ, and this time I think it will start...y'know, we'll make the album as a four piece.

You're going to be doing some European touring, and you were saying you were going to Australia; are you playing in Australia or is that more of a holiday?

Well it's a combination of a holiday, and I'm going to do one small sort of unpublicised showcase there. A friend and a colleague named Greta Gertler (www.gretagertler.com), she lives in Brooklyn, but she's an Australian musician, she's there touring, and so I'm going to go and spend some time with her, y'know, she's doing some shows there.

What sort of venues have you got lined up for Europe?

We're actually doing...the first trip to Europe is a kind of a tiny showcase sort of a trip. We're doing two tiny little clubs to play in, I don't know if you know them they're...one's called The 12 Bar Club, lots of musicians here in New York said it's great, a tiny little place.

It's certainly well known as being a nice little venue.

Tiny and strange and quirky, so we're doing that, and we're doing another tiny, strange, quirky venue in Brixton called Windmill, and we may be doing some...yet to be seen, we could be doing some radio while we're there. Just a way to start...it's been kind of amazing actually, that everyone who recommends someone in London, y'know, someone who writes a blog, or someone who...even you guys y'know Americana UK, or different shops, everybody's been so receptive and offered other press contacts, and another musician is putting us up in a hotel, and it's just been quite amazing to be making our first trip, and then there's such a warm receptivity in London so far, Also we'll probably do a more extensive...now that we've ...we're doing this trip, we'll probably do more extensive European thing in four months or so.

I've got down here that Nat takes photos, and does the website design, as well and I was wondering do you have other jobs as well, or are you currently committed to music full time?

No we're not, well we do have other jobs as well. Nat is actually a designer by trade and I can't disclose the banality of the work that I do (both laughing), but it pays pretty well, and we've been pretty fiercely independent to this point, so... y'know, paying for everything ourselves, and I think 'though, this year, we'll have to make that leap to working with labels, because it's just gotten out of our hands a bit. We can't manage everything ourselves, and do the music well, so we're looking for people to license the first album, then we'll be working on the second album this year as well.

Earlier influences? You mentioned Hendrix before, and I noticed something about Boy George, which I wouldn't proclaim about personally...

That's funny because everybody I talk to in Britain, and I mention that...because I recently published my ten favourite albums on this on-line magazine, and everybody in Britain is horrified that I would mention that. I guess it's a perception thing.

I haven't seen that list.

Yeah, all the Britons are horrified, but I think it's hard to say what music is an influence versus what you just love. I honestly don't know which of them are directed onto the music because I definitely didn't have a strong stylistic influence from anyone. But yeah, Boy George is...I think he's...I think history will show that he... there was...he got... Oh boy, I'm trying to proclaim the merits of...

It's not something you have to justify. I think that the idea of it is that he's such a "showbiz" character really.

Ah, but come on, that first album, I think if you look at that first album, it's...there's nothing like it at the time. I don't think there was...it was passionate, and it was slightly campy, it was primal y'know, and it was really, I think, exciting and especially looking back at the progression, and what they became, but at the time you think, any first album, they're unknowns at the time that they made their first album, making it out of pure will to make it, the will to make that album. And I think the first album is fantastic, and I remember when I first heard the single, in the United States, "Do You Really Want To Hurt Me" was the first single here, I was just enraptured by the sound of it and the sweepingness, and his soulful voice, and...

I can understand that, I suppose the overriding thing for me is I can never really get over the lyrics "War is stupid" which is just about as banal a lyric as I've ever heard, it may be true, but it's still banal.

Oh that was a dark point, I try not to think about that particular album, but the one's preceding it were fantastic.

I noticed in a review, which I found interesting, that somebody had mentioned the Koyaanisqatsi film. I think it was on www.jenyk.com

Which film?

Koyaanisqatsi, it was an arthouse film, which was probably twenty years old I would think. (1983 Ed.)

Oh dear God, I'm afraid I don't know it but ...

The reason being is it's very much ... it's a scenic thing, watching the weather move. I know it doesn't translate very well in description, but it's actually a quite important, moving film, and the idea was that you should turn down the soundtrack and put your album on, which I thought was particularly relevant so maybe...

Yeah, well I hope...y'know Nat and I have always thought about the band as more about place than anything else; it's very visual and it's very...it's a lot about just inhabiting places, so I can understand if...

I think Koyaanisqatsi is a Native American word. (Hopi Indian for "Life out of balance" apparently. Ed.)

Now you've got me interested.

It had resonance with me when I saw it, maybe you should take a look at it anyway, even ten minutes of it will probably do you.

I really hope that our music ends up in film application. We're hoping to produce a video for our next album, but I think there's such a...to me the music...sometimes I think of the music not as actually what I write, but as a listener as well. To me it just brings up places, visuals...and so I'm really hoping that someday someone who does films will take a liking because I'd love to see it, and hear it, with a film.

You've been getting quite a bit of radio play in the US. I saw something on Irene Trudel, on WFMU (www.wfmu.org), which looked like a very eclectic mix of music?

The best station on the planet! It's one of the early pioneers of freeform radio and even more than AAA, and College, it's wildly eclectic, but very tasteful and it manages to...I think it's the best radio station you'll find in New York, and they have magnificent DJ's and magnificent interviewers. We've been really lucky, they supported us from very early on and, y'know, we're independent so we haven't had a huge radio promotion, but everyone that gets their hands on it plays it, and likes it, so, like I said, I think we've got to finally cross the line and get label partners, so that we can...

I think you probably need the impetus of somebody else pushing you along?

We're tired.

I'm sure, weary. You're playing at the Warhol, part of the Warhol museum.

Yeah, we played there. We actually played there at the Andy Warhol museum in Pittsburgh, which is my home town, a few months ago, and it was quite dramatic because it was a brutal snowstorm in the north east, absolutely brutal snowstorm, but everybody bought tickets in advance, so they'd feel guilty if they hadn't come, as they played projections of a Warhol film, of somebody sleeping, while we played. We had a classical, a real live classical, percussionist play with us, it was fantastically pleasurable to play that show. We played with Ida.

That was Pittsburgh but there seem to be plenty of venues, suitable for your type of music, in New York, which seems very healthy?

Right, because we can play tiny little places that cater to a folk sort of crowd, or we can play, we're playing tomorrow probably the biggest room we've played so far, probably six hundred people, but the best sound system in New York City, it's called the Bowery Ballroom, and I can't wait because it will get...it will really take the low end, and the drumming, and the grittiness of our playing, y'know, so it's...that's the great thing about New York, you're right, you can play, with so many kinds of rooms, and share bills with country artists, like Amy Allison, we play with her a lot y'know we play with pop bands, and indie bands, and it's what it's all about in New York, that's why you suffer all the other indignities.

Thanks Megan.

Talk to you later.

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