

Jon Boden
Doctor of Music
Durham Cathedral, 2 July 2019

Jon Boden is the most versatile and inventive folk musician of his generation, combining skills as an arranger, composer and performer with a powerful vocal style and great flair for fiddle, concertina and guitar. With various projects and groups, he has won eleven BBC Radio Two Folk Awards, more than any other musician, and earned two silver discs as leader of Bellowhead.

His achievements demonstrate a mix of artistic range, commercial success and a commitment to revitalising folk traditions and reinventing folk songs for popular audiences. Boden's musical and dramatic sense has enabled him to entertain and engage audiences, taking folk performance into novel dramatic and theatrical forms for duo, solo and big band shows and albums. In addition, he has worked on a range of collaborations and commissions from the Royal Shakespeare Company to music for television, film, and theatre. In all of this, he has held together tradition with invention and performance with participation.

Jon read Medieval Studies at Collingwood College, Durham graduating in 1998. Alongside academic work, he wrote a musical, composed and acted for Castle Theatre and was an active member of the Durham folk music scene. He cites the weekly singing sessions at the Colpitts Hotel in Durham as the best he has been to. Learning from the likes of Robin Dale and Ian McCulloch, Jon says that this "massive noise in a small space" was formative to his love of unaccompanied social singing. He is still known as 'Student Jon' at Durham City Folk Club.

Professor John McKinnell remembers Jon as a highly valued member of the experimental Durham Medieval Theatre Company. "In our production of the rarely performed early-sixteenth century comedy Calisto and Melibea he gave a memorable performance as the seducing young aristocrat Calisto ... with a perfect command ... of the manners of the Petrarchan lover. A masterly performance!"

The experiences and enthusiasms that took root during Jon's time at Durham are found throughout his career: performance and participation; the power of social singing; drama and theatricality; poetry and tradition. At the end of his time as an undergraduate, he opted to eschew accountancy and study for a Masters in Composition for Musical Theatre at London College of Music.

A key impetus to Jon's journey was his collaboration from with Oxford melodeonist John Spiers from 2000. Together, they created a new stylistic and performance base for a distinctively English folk music that was confident, dramatic and cosmopolitan. Their award-winning performances as Spiers & Boden were the basis for their next innovation: the formation of Bellowhead in 2004 with Jon as lead singer and arranger. Bellowhead reinvented big band folk and brought together some of the best folk musicians of their generation, garnering a string of awards. It broke a glass ceiling for English folk music within the contemporary folk scene, becoming "the big party band" that could headline and finish a festival. Sing along audience favourites like New York Girls delivered hits that made a large band viable and combined entertainment with experimentation. By the Hedonism and Broadside albums of 2010 and 2012, they had made the leap from a folk club and festival audience towards to wider commercial success.

Large venues and staged spectacle moved Bellowhead away from the grassroots participation Jon had fallen in love with at the Colpitts as a student. Rather than accepting this as a necessary part of success, Bellowhead kept alive that tradition through after show events. Audiences at gigs were invited to a communal session in a local pub. These legendary events sought to place music in a different context, and to emphasise the way that folk requires the people for it to be and become a tradition.

A further example of Jon's innovative commitment to tradition is the 'A Folk Song a Day' project of 2010. He recorded and released a different traditional song for each day of the year developing an amazing open source on-line project, creating a remarkable resource for the digital age and folkies anywhere.

Jon has released three solo albums of original songs. Songs from the Floodplains unfolds a post-apocalyptic concept album set in an English valley on the urban fringes. It combines the drama and narrative of traditional folk with an almost cinematic feel for character and landscape. It anticipates the future social relationships of a climate-changed post-carbon world. Floodplain is a masterpiece that fulfils the potential of album as art form demanding a hundred listens and allowing the audience to write their own narrative in spaces that it leaves.

“Folk Music is about context not material”. If Jon stood up today in a pub or cathedral and sang, it would be folk music, but if you paid to see him up on stage, it would be performance art. These tensions and practices inform what he has achieved as an artist. His passion for social singing and taking folk music back to its roots as a shared activity bridges the typical divide between audience and performer. Above all, I do urge you all to seek out his music and live shows and keep him in work... there’s no money in a honorary degree!

Collingwood College’s motto is Love the Best, and Jon’s work has kept faith with his love of the traditions of folk music and the invention of new musical and performance styles.

Chancellor, I present Jon Boden to receive the degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*.

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