

Musicians on Bikes

by Jet McDonald



Illustrations
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*“The maker’s weird is to be a wanderer:
the poets of mankind go through many countries,
speak their needs, say their thanks.*

*Always they meet with someone, in the south
lands or the north, who understands their art,
an open handed man...”*

**FROM THE “WORD-HOARD” OF WIDSITH,
MIEVEAL MINSTREL**

Musicians are roamers. Minstrels and Roma have always travelled by foot, horse and cart and it’s always been a surprise to me that the next step wasn’t a hop onto the bicycle. But the affordable bike arrived not long before the combustion engine poked its nose into the byways, and with the advent of mass media and global culture musicians were packed into vans like so much mouldy produce.

It’s only more recently that musicians have been getting back on their bikes and enjoying the ride to the gig almost much as the gig itself. If music is noise in motion, then cycling echoes that same pleasure through travel, with rhythms, ups and downs and lyrical adventures.

The medieval minstrel equated joy with movement and music, where the poems and carols of courtiers were literally heard and seen as a kind of joy in motion. Musicians and artists have always been alive to the moment and cycling provides that self-same raucous ‘presence’ in the world. “We don’t live for tomorrow,” says the Macedonian gypsy Naat Veliov “we live for today. And it shows in our playing – we put everything in the heart and the soul. To make music is our happiness and we love to share our happiness.”

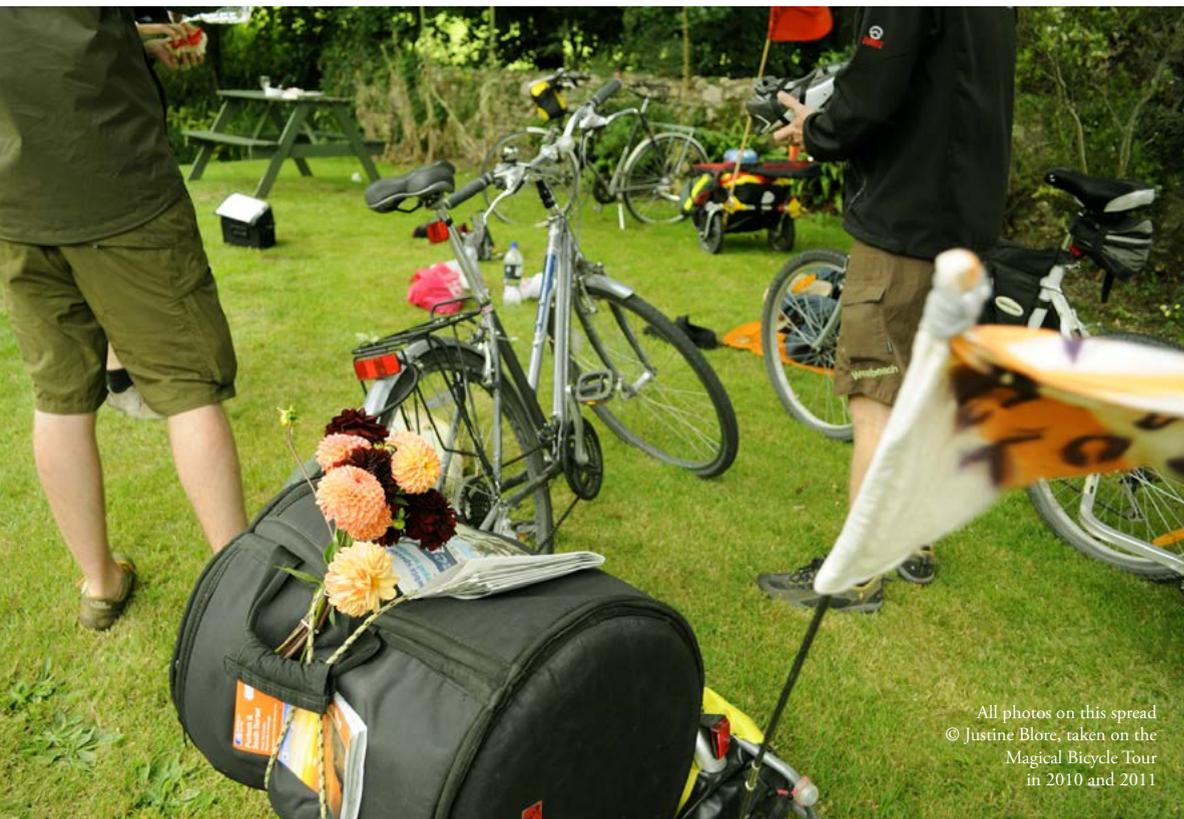
Historically, travelling minstrels weren’t just players, they were all-round circus entertainers and you’d more likely find them at a village

festival, the ‘Ale Minstrel’, than a courtly parlour. And now, as then, you can still find a particular kind of wayward musician enjoying the upended rules of a good festival, and travelling with their songs over yonder hills.

I gathered together some musicians who travel on bikes and chatted to them about their experiences of riding and playing music. You can catch up with their songs on the Boneshaker bandcamp site. Not all the tunes are odes to joy, more a vivid relish for life that mirrors the ups and downs of a good cycling trip.

The first chap I met was Pip Taylor, a mischievous, curly-headed fellow who cycled from the UK to Damascus in Syria just after Bestival, the Isle of Wight musical mash up, in summer 2007.

“I had a tiny $\frac{3}{4}$ size travel guitar that I took along to all the festivals. I became slightly minstrelised by them, learning loads of songs. I started to write down all the songs I knew and then carried that list around and asked people what they wanted to hear. On tour, being on my own, this was very much an icebreaker. I didn’t just want to be a guy on a bike, I wanted to give something. It’s very easy to be just a pair of eyes, not really engaging with anything. I was sensitive to the idea that as a tourist you’re just consuming, just gobbling up the scenery, not giving anything back.



All photos on this spread
© Justine Blore, taken on the
Magical Bicycle Tour
in 2010 and 2011

"I cycled across France, taking the ferry to Corsica and Sardinia and then riding across Italy and Greece, staying with people, taking rests, falling in and out of love with cycling, before pedalling all the way from Turkey to Syria and Damascus.

"I don't know any songs that aren't in English, and by the time I got to Italy I could have been singing anything. Because I don't play particularly well, I rely on knowing the lyrics to keep people interested, so it didn't really work. But by the time I got to Turkey the music was so different it became fun again. People just listened to me and thought 'Oh my god what kind of rhythm is that?' I got invited to a couple of jam sessions and compared to them I felt like I was playing a nursery rhyme, country 'n' western style, in four-four. It seemed so simple and pedestrian, whereas their music was so fluid and mysterious, the notes were all bent.

"Syria was even weirder. On the way down to Damascus people would see the guitar and I'd get dragged off the

bike – quite forcefully sometimes – into their houses to play music. And then they'd get out these strange drums and bowed instruments...

"When I got to Damascus I was house-sitting in the Christian quarter and ended up on the roof most of the day, learning songs. That's where I wrote 'Nothing Really Matters'. I'd had the refrain in my head for months, then started making up lyrics to make myself laugh. I was worried about my motives for doing the trip; there was a bit of love involved, a bit of regret, a bit of heartbreak. I was worried I was taking all of that with me and amplifying it because I was on my own. There was a bit of therapy involved."

As you cycle alone, the song-in-the-head becomes a conversation with yourself. Many of the songs I've written in my head while cycling (some of them detailed in Boneshaker 11) have a reflective feel that maybe comes from riding for so far and for so long...

"I wrote five or six songs on that journey and all of them started out as humming in my head. I fell in love with

a girl in Rome, totally, stupidly, and I spent two weeks writing her a song in my head. I had nothing else to do with my brain. It's really calming being able to choose what you think about.

You have the freedom of the outsider when you're cycling like that. You're an observer. You go feral. Everyone's settled in these places you're cycling through, they've all got their routines but you've left that behind, even if only temporarily, and that's hugely appealing for me. After three or four days of rough camping and sleeping in your clothes you get into that frame of mind quite quickly..."

Pip taps into one of the connections between a certain kind of revelry and bike touring here - a bit like the way that a decent music festival is time out, an inversion of the rules of society. And it seems to me that when you're cycling like this you're escaping the same static rules, passing through other people's lives...

The Brotherhood of Lizard's frontman Martin Newell is a reveller in different style. He bypassed the pop highway by

embarking on the first 'green bike tour' through England in 1989/90. If you Google 'Brotherhood of Lizards' there's an amusing clip of Martin and his bandmate Nell cycling with all their gear through rainy 1980s East Anglia and playing market towns, record shops and radio stations, looking every inch wayward minstrels. Martin had a wave of purple hair then. He's got less hair of a different colour now but there's the same guttural passion about music, cycling and life. Interviewing Martin is a bit like interviewing a bicycle. One push and he's off...

"The boss of our record company said 'there isn't any chance you're going to go touring are you?' But that was one of the reasons I bust up with my last band, that tour-van treadmill. So I said, with a manic gleam in my eye, 'On bicycles!'

"I looked at a radio map of the South of England and found that most of the radio stations were only about 30 miles apart – if we strapped our guitars to our backs and packed minimal gear we could do a busking tour. Cycle 30 miles, hit the town, do interviews with the local papers and radio, busk in the street, maybe do a gig and then move onto the next one. 'That would generate some publicity,' I said.

"They said 'what do you need?' and I said 'Two decent bikes.' Between them they cost about £400, whereas I'd worked out that hotels for a month with a transit van, roadies and all the kit would cost a lot more, so bicycle economics immediately appealed to the record company.

"By the end of the tour we'd done about five or six television appearances and the world knew who we were. At one point Dave Stewart [of multi-platinum-selling duo Eurythmics] rang up the boss of the record company and said 'are those two lunatics on bikes anything to do with you?'

"We did two tours in the end and both were about a thousand miles in total. I was very sorry when it was over – it was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. Built a bit of character into me. I came back absolutely fearless."

This lack of fear is a vanquishing of a kind of stage fright for the world, and the musician and the cyclist both experience this as they weave around the mainstream and wake up to a more emotional and direct experience of travel. For Martin it was about bypassing the listing hulks of the traditional music industry whereas for a younger group of musicians it's about understanding the joys of localism, pedalling off the information superhighway and enjoying live gigs in unexpected places...

'The Magical Bike Tour' – named after the Beatles 'Magical Mystery Tour' – are a group of like-minded musicians who

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have been touring rural England and Wales by bike for the last three summers. Regular riders are Dino, a saxophonist, and Jesse Vernon, member of folkish bands This is the Kit and Morningstar. I met them and Jesse's long-term collaborator, Kate Stables, also of This is the Kit. Jesse explains some of the inspirations for the Tour:

"We want to cycle and we want to play music; to put the two together is brilliant, so the idea is to take all our gear with us and combine a cycling holiday with gigs... We all take tonnes of stuff; everybody's got a trailer. The first year we had a few problems, especially with the double bass. It tumbled from its trailer going round a corner and the headstock got smashed off. The lead guitarist won't play unless it's through his valve amp, so he takes the valves out after each gig and puts them in a nest of cotton wool so they don't get rattled."

Despite the tonnes of stuff, Dino says they "try to make everything as light as possible and only do 20 miles a day, so we're not too knackered when we get to the venue.... That first year, four people were physically sick as I misjudged the distances. I learnt my lesson. The drum kits, stands and cymbals can be split between people but the double bass trailer is always that bit more heavy. Once you've done one double-bass hill all your muscles are worn out, so I check the OS map more carefully now. It's not

about covering big distances; it's about getting to the next pub."

Musicians have always been roamers but when the tour bus appeared I wonder if some of the lifestyle of roaming was lost, with people just arriving in places...

"Well travelling like this could be a way of life," says Dino, "all you need is sustenance. As long as people give you somewhere to stay that's all you need. You won't be making any profit but you don't need it; you're not paying for a house, you're not paying for petrol. In one place we stayed in a theatre, just slept on the stage. I'd love to take this tour further – a couple of months of solid touring around Europe, thousands of bicycle miles... it is possible."

Kate, meanwhile, floats another proposition: "I'd love to tour by boat. My sister has a narrowboat that she has just turned into a floating youth hostel. It can sleep 12 people so maybe it could carry a couple of bands and be the venue as well..."

The idea of a floating venue makes me think of the idea of 'Slow Music'. We've got Slow Food and Slow Travel. Why not Slow Music? Songs arrive so fast nowadays, in the click of a button. I like the idea of music arriving really slowly; pattering down a canal, or rolling along a road on a well-tuned bike, the musician and the rider again finding different weaving paths through the gridlock of society, bumping over the kerb into a more wayward festival of the imagination. But Slow Music doesn't have to mean the music itself is downtempo. Take the work of Puncture Kit, aka David Osborne, who featured in the very first issue of Boneshaker. Dave converted a single speed bike so it could both carry his drums and be the frame for his drumkit and then he started busking in the streets of London. He's come a long way since then and he too has been pedalling between festivals.

"When I was last in Boneshaker I'd only be doing Puncture Kit for about a year and I had a pretty crappy bike with toy drums on. I just did it for a joke really, down in Brick Lane. Since then I've been focusing on learning how to really play and I've got a stronger bike and a better kit. I moved from London to Brighton and got to do the drumming on some electronic music that we ended playing live at a festival in Malawi called 'Lake of the Stars'. I stuck around in Malawi for nearly a year afterwards, riding out to

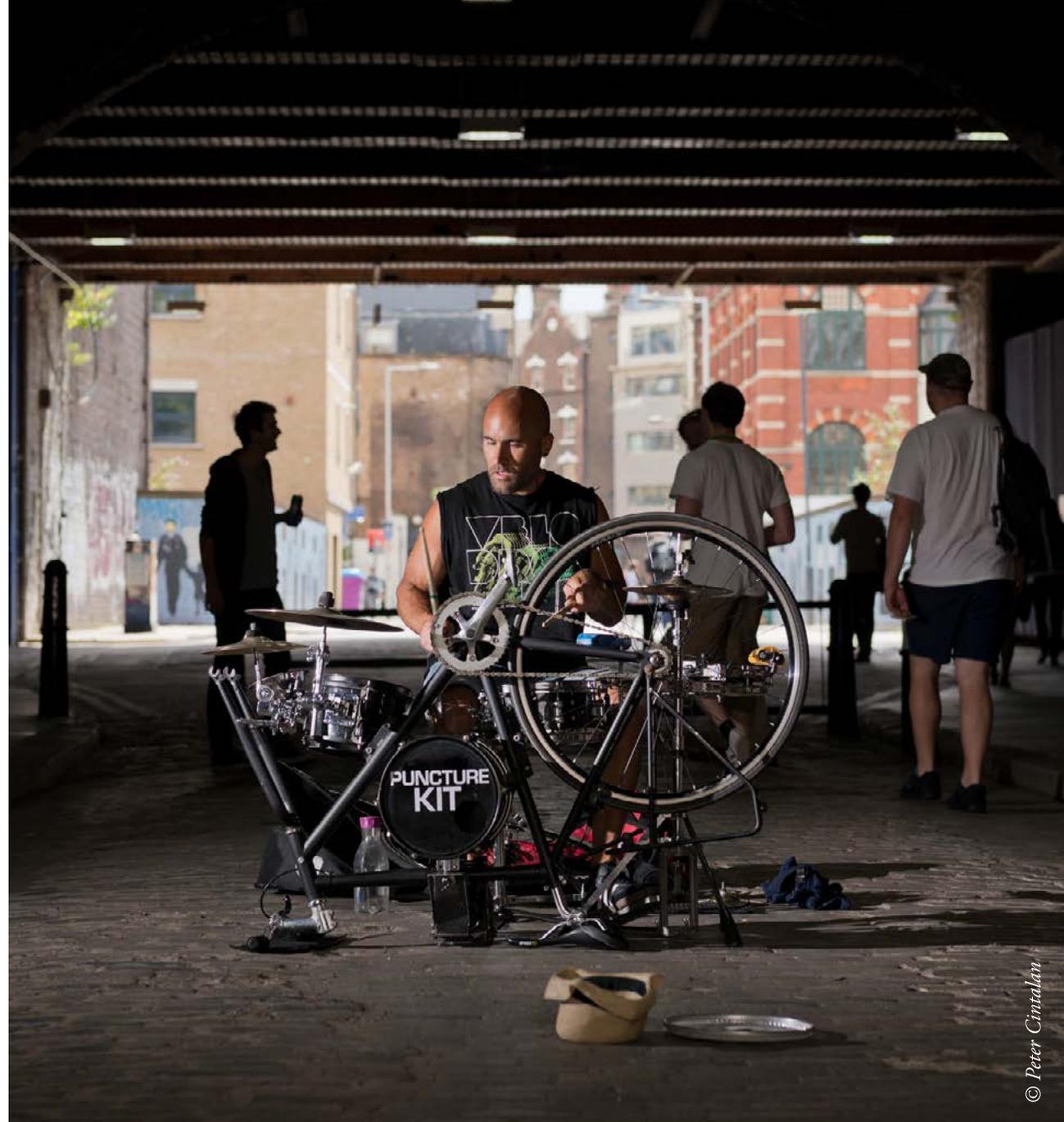
communities and schools on the bike and doing workshops. A lot of places I went they'd never even seen a drum kit before. It's not the fact that the kit's carried on a bike that surprises them – over there they carry trees on their backs while they're riding a bike...

After Malawi I came back and recorded an album, called 'The Bicycle Drummer', though the music totally wasn't influenced by cycling – I'd like to be known much more as a drummer. But it means everything to me that I've got a bike drum kit. It's enabled me to get where I am now. I played the Glastonbury Festival, first as a roving sideshow – then in front of 3000 people in the Dance Village. Since then I've worked as a drummer for London Contemporary Dance School, played at the London Olympics road cycling race and at the Brit Awards after-party... And of course I go everywhere by bike anyway; it's just the best way of getting around."

All the musicians I spoke to have their own take on bikes and music but the same impulses that power their love of cycling are alive in their music; a sense of freedom, independence and lust for life and a desire to weave around the ruts that mire the combustion engine in its maze of concrete. I remember a round-the-world cyclist shouting at me over a few beers in India: "You've got to get off the rails, man. Get off the rails." And you can hop those rails on a bike or on a musical riff, spinning a whirligig through what the poet William Blake would have called, "the circus of the imagination". Music and wandering will always go together and a wandering musician on a bike will always arrive at a festival bristling with stories, with a sun-kissed face and oil and earth under their fingernails, low on calories but overflowing with the sustenance of life. Buy them a drink, they've earned it. Here's Havelock the Dane from 1275:

*"Herketh to me, gode men,
Wives, maidens, and alle men,
Of a tale that ich you wile telle.
At the beginning of ure tale,
Fill me a cuppe of full good ale."*

www.jetsingsongs.com
www.myspace.com/themagicalbiketour
www.martinnewell.co.uk
www.puncturekit.co.uk



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Tracks on www.boneshakermag.bandcamp.com

PIP TAYLOR - 'NOTHING REALLY MATTERS'
MARTIN NEWELL - 'SATURDAY GAMES'
JESSE VERNON - 'SUN IN YOUR EYES'
THIS IS THE KIT - 'WITH HER WHEELS AGAIN'
PUNCTURE KIT - 'SPANNER IN THE HAT'