

PLUGGED

IN

THE MUSIC MAGAZINE FOR WALES

SPECIAL ISSUE



THE BLACKOUT
on chart success — and
living with Mum

PLUS
The Oratorios
The Epauettes
Y Betti Galws
Fusebox
The 3Gs Community Choir

ALSO
Live Merthyr Music

When you think of Merthyr Tydfil and its musical heritage, not that many names spring to mind. There is the great Peter Carey, the show-stopping singer famous for his role in *Phantom Of The Opera* and... Donny Osmond, though really it's a distant family link as he never actually grew up on the Gurnos estate himself! But those two famous names aside, there was only one group of guys who actually featured on the Merthyr PLUGGED IN list of bands we wanted to talk to. They are, of course, The Blackout.

PLUGGED IN first interviewed The Blackout prior to their gig at Cardiff University for Issue 3 and have always kept an eye on the six guys' progress — as they have done with us, asking about the next issue whenever we meet. So to finally get hold of them and give them a cover was a long time coming — and a bit of a coup, as the boys were in the middle of a tour and were back in Wales visiting family for just one week...it happened to be the week we contacted them explaining we were working on a mini-mag called Merthyr PLUGGED IN. As usual, they were extremely supportive of what we were doing and three of the six-piece were able to give up one of their evenings to come along and be interviewed by two of our young students on the project.

Settling down at a table just inside the picture window of Glamorgan Gates in Merthyr's high street, Gareth, Matt and Sean were introduced to Merthyr PLUGGED IN's Alex and Taylor who would be asking a few questions. But before the interview got underway, I [Darren] started the conversation by talking about the distance the guys have come since our last interview, having released two albums in a fairly short time — firstly, the long-awaited tour de force *We Are The Dynamite* followed, more recently, by the more commercial but no less explosive *Best In Town*.

So how did they feel *We Are The Dynamite* was received? Sean gives a proud little smile and says, "I think it was received quite well." Very modest there I think! "Looking back, we were kind of forced into it by our label Fierce Panda who basically said: 'OK guys, you've got to have an album out in two months.' But it was good for us to have a full-length album out, with lots of new material on it."

Well they definitely gave themselves a bit of an anthem with the title track, I remember hearing loud chants from the crowd of "We are the dynamite!" before the band hit the stage. "Yes, our fans seem to like that one," says Sean, again in modest tones.

With the release of their second full-length album *Best In Town* the band seem to have picked up more radio airplay. I was amazed, but very pleasantly surprised and happy for the guys, when I heard the first single, *Save Yourself*, being played by Jo Whaley on daytime



Radio 1. So what is it like to be finally recognised and placed into the mainstream?

"Whatever you do when you make something new you're always going to have people who are not going to like it, but we've never intended to limit ourselves to a certain kind of audience. It's always been a dream of ours to get as far and do as much as we possibly can. We can never be accused of selling out because how can you sell out from your original intentions? We're a kind of pop band in a rock band's body, whose song-writing skills have developed as we've developed. Working with Jason Perry on the *Best In Town* has given us a compatriot who has found the best in us, commercial or otherwise. You know, a little bit pop, a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n' roll..."

Gareth interjects: "We've never really stuck to one formula from the start. If you take our first ep, *The Blackout*, *The Blackout*, *The Blackout*, most of the songs were heavy, but then you get *High Tide* that brought us away from everything else we were doing at that time kind of showing the next step. What you now get with *Best In Town* is a sort of mix of everything and all that influences us on one album."

Matt adds: "We just like to mix it up, which shows we're not following one route."

This is a factor that was shown with the release of the first single from *Best In Town*. Called *Save Yourself* it is a very commercially astute song that is still without a doubt The Blackout. Mellow in its style, the chorus consists of the repeated line "This is The Blackout" which leads me to say that I believe it to be one of the most effective pieces of song-writing marketing that I've heard in a long time. If you're new to The Blackout, like most Radio 1 listeners would be, then the boys are telling you exactly who they are throughout the song.

So who formulated that idea? "We'd written the main structure of the song but had a problem with the chorus, though we knew we had a certain number of syllables to sing. It was actually Jason's idea to use 'The Blackout' as the line and we thought that'll work, plus we'd be constantly shouting our name out," explains Sean.

THE BLACKOUT

Merthyr PLUGGED IN gets an exclusive interview with the boys from The Blackout

Words by Alex & Taylor Photographs by Darren Warner

Matt adds: "It was kind of strange. We'd finished the album and had left Sean and Gavin in Essex to complete the vocals, not knowing what this crucial chorus was going to be. When we got it back and we heard 'This is The Blackout' it was so right."

So with six members in a band that is touring relentlessly, the boys must feel like they're living in each other's pockets. I had to ask how come they aren't publicly ripping each other's heads off. Matt kicks off by saying, "The thing is, we're all friends and basically have always been together..."

"Apart from the drummer who we found one day in Giles Sports," interjects Sean with a wry smile. "The band became something to do really just to pass the time. And nothing has changed. We're just friends who play music together."

"Everything's a joke," adds Gareth. "Sometimes we're just having a laugh and practising something and we go: 'Boys! We've been to Japan, twice!! How did that happen?'"

"If you'd told me three years ago that I'd know Linkin Park, I'd have said: 'That's not going to happen'," adds Sean. "To have toured with them, well, that was awesome."

The gig Sean was referring to was Linkin Park's European tour that Gail and myself caught up with at the National Bowl in Milton Keynes, which under the title of Projekt Revoution also featured the superstar rapper Jay-Z. Much to our disappointment, The Blackout were not scheduled to play this one-off event — though the boys were moshing with the rest of the crowd on the day. A shame because we're sure the 80,000 crowd would have been blown away by the Merthyr boys.

So who else have the guys toured with? "So many great bands you wouldn't believe. Like America's The Used, who I got to sing on stage with," says Sean. "In fact, I'll have to say that of all the bands we've ever wanted to play with, we actually have. Apart from the ones who are dead, that is. I'd like to reanimate Freddy Mercury... but apparently that's not allowed!"

Personally, I've lost count of how many times I've seen The Blackout play live, first noticing them at the Full Ponty 2006 where they were down the list and regarded as "a band from Merthyr". Since that time I've caught them at Clwb y Bont, performing an acoustic set with guest vocals by Ian Watkins (of the LostProphets), playing the Full Ponty 2007 (almost topping the playlist and taking to the stage with the crowd chanting "We Are The Dynamite"), then headlining the rock night at the following year's Big Weekend, among many other occasions. (These mean a lot to me as all the gigs were within a mile of my house, so I could float home happy.) One thing I've noticed each time is that the live set hasn't just got stronger due to the professional nature of a band's learning process, but that they are getting much more energetic at a time when most other groups seem to calm down and just perform the numbers. Unlike any other group, The Blackout seem to have stepped up a gear.

"With the amount of touring that we've done and the amount of other bands that we've seen who just seem to be strolling along, I want them to say of us, 'What's wrong with these guys, they're constantly running about.' When we started the band we didn't think about things like recording albums, we just wanted to play live. And we do enjoying shocking people! By touring so much we've got to hone our instrumental and vocal skills to a point that means we can run around and climb things," says Sean.

"And enjoy ourselves," adds Matt.

Gareth sums up saying: "We try to be the band that we'd like to go and see, and no offence to indie bands but if you're just stood there your audience might as well just listen to the CD and save themselves £30 or more. As for us, we're just trying to mix it up a bit."

The Blackout and LostProphets have always shown friendship and respect for each other, with Ian Watkins even guesting on the anthem hit *Hide Tide Baby* (check). Have they ever considered doing a double-headlining tour or collaborating on a track together?

"What I'd like to do is a Christmas dingle, but not just with the LostProphets



with all the Welsh bands, like Funeral For A Friend, Bullet For My Valentine and Attack! Attack! among others," answers Sean.

Gail (the editor) who is in the room keeping an eye on the proceedings and never one to miss an opportunity quickly interjects, "Well I've always wanted to do a cover shoot with all the Welsh bands on it. Maybe for the magazine's 5th Birthday." (I'm not quite sure how we would fit them all on the cover but, hey, I'll find a way!) "Yeah," says Sean getting excited at the prospect, "and we could put a CD on the front with tracks from all the bands including the Christmas song!"

When the laughter dies down, Taylor and Alex start to question the guys about coming from a town like Merthyr Tydfil.

Taylor: While you were growing up in Merthyr was their anything in particular that influenced you to be a part of the music industry? "Boredom, I guess," answers Sean. "When we were in school there was really nothing to do. Matthew and me were sitting in a science lesson at one time and said, 'Let's just start a band' and because

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this fella turned up, stripped to the waste and had white pride tattooed across his chest. We started playing and he looked at us as if saying 'poofs' and quickly left."

Taylor: So was there any band you wanted to be like? "LostProphet, I guess," says Sean. "For a long time I wanted to be Ian Watkins, but now I know him I find him quite annoying really..." He laughs. "I did want to be Limp Biskit, too, and definitely wanted a red baseball cap."

"I've still got mine," adds Gareth.

"And for a while," continues Sean, "I wanted to be Kelly Jones, being a fan of the Stereophonics at that time. I saw them in Morpha Stadium."

"I think everyone in Wales saw them in Morpha Stadium," quips Gareth again.

Stadium," quips Gareth again.

"Just loads of bands really, including PLUGGED IN Issue 4 cover stars Midasuno, who we used to follow everywhere. They were just wild and smashed up the venue."

Most bands try to escape the places where they grew up, but The Blackout are renowned for returning home. So what is it about the town that pulls them back?

"My mother lives here," says Matt, and Sean adds: "I have thought about getting an apartment in Cardiff, but I like being here. Merthyr is not as bad as people like to make out. My parents live here and living with them is cheaper than having my own place. In fact there's no point in any of us having an apartment as we're never home long enough before we're off touring again."

But do you think that Merthyr could do with a decent live venue?

"I don't think it's that necessary. Venues in the past have failed because Cardiff isn't that far away and attracts the more popular bands. They probably think Cardiff is far enough so don't want to travel further into Wales," answers Sean, adding, "Not that it's like Deliverance up here!"

So are you proud to be Welsh? "I guess so. It's growing on me." Then Sean explains: "I originally didn't like the patriotism that you

can get with the Rugby boys going out saying 'Let's fight the English'. But my pride has grown because I think we're a humorous nation who have learned not to take ourselves too seriously."

"We're not ashamed of our heritage, being from Merthyr or Wales," continues Matt. "We always tell our audience we're from Wales, but don't need to go as far as having 'Made In Wales' tattooed across our foreheads."

"And we do have the best flag in the world. Think of a better one!" challenges Sean. I rack my brain and instantly think of the St George's Cross but don't believe that anyone else in the room, let alone Methyr Tydfil, would agree with my choice.

"If somebody made a flag with a wolf fighting a bear on it, maybe that'll win, but I don't think anybody could really beat a dragon," concludes Gareth.

So what would do they believe The Blackout would have turned out like if they had grown up in somewhere like Surbiton in Surrey? "Well we would never have seen the LostProphets which would have been a bummer..." quips Sean.

Matt adds: "Welsh bands seem more focused on songs, while English bands are more technical. Our personalities are like this, because of being from Merthyr Tydfil, being from Wales."

"Also, we would have been English which would have automatically made us scumbags..." jokes Sean as he looks straight at me, the English fella sitting opposite him.

The Blackout have presence and have the wit, humour and, of course, talent to take them away from the confines of the town where they grew up. But they are not ready to turn their backs on the place, nor I believe ever will. They want to stay in touch and by staying within touching distance of the ground will always mean that the ground is in touching distance of them. Cut the ties and you'll float off, forgetting who you are. The Blackout will never forget who they are, ever.



The Best In Town by The Blackout is out now, featuring additional vocals on Children Of The Night by Year 6 Heolgerrig Primary School, Merthyr Tydfil

Y Betti Galws

Y Betti Galws are an exclusively Welsh-speaking band, who believe that their music transcends all language barriers, and you can enjoy their music whether you speak Welsh or not. The band members are Jamie on guitar, Phyl on guitar, Eifion on bass, Tom on drums, and Emma and Delyth on vocals. Jamie is the main songwriter, but all of the band members contribute to the mix. They have been together for a year after jamming together as friends, some of whom met at school, the others in Ganolfan Gymraeg the Welsh Centre in Merthyr. Their rather unusual name is a play on words not quite Welsh not quite English, it is also the name of one of Captain Morgan's (the Welsh pirate) ships. Their musical influences range from PJ Harvey and Lyndisfarne to Eva Cassidy and Sibrýdion. They have played quite a few gigs around the Merthyr area, Bedroc 09, Taith Tafod, Clwb Y Bont, and the Merthyr Show, to name but a few, and are hoping to be on Radio Cymru's C2 sessions. They also are hoping to record some demos in Glamorgan University's Atrium in Cardiff. This band is well worth a listen, with vocal harmonies from Delyth and Emma, that beautifully compliment the music. www.myspace.com/ybettigalws

KAREN MOORE



The Epauettes

We spoke to The Epauettes who are a five-piece band that have been together for about six years. They are inspired by The Libertines, so when they first formed they were a Libertines covers band. They started a band just to keep their talent which is playing music. They have been writing their own material for as long as they can remember. They told us that if they all quit work then they would want to make it to the top with their band. Their dream gig would be on the Radio 1 stage in the Reading festival because they have been going there together for a couple of years. They like playing venues where there are loads of people watching



BRADLEY WALSTOW & ANDREW COOPER

them. They grew up by listening to bands like Oasis, The Clash, The Beatles and The Smiths. They choose their name by default because they needed a name as they had an up-coming gig and were asked what they were called for the posters!

www.myspace.com/theepauettes

The 3Gs Community Choir

With around 20 members, the 3Gs choir makes a noise whether they're singing or not! The 3Gs Choir practises out of Bishop Hedley school, Merthyr, every week, and is made up of young people from the local community – similar to PLUGGED IN, no one is turned away if they are willing to show commitment. The choir has been performing at major events over the last year or so, including at the Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff Castle and more recently working with the Welsh National Opera to perform before the opening night of their opera *Onegin* at the Wales Millennium Centre. They also performed live on stage with Mike Peters, of The Alarm fame, when he played The Coliseum in Aberdare last summer for his Love Hope Strength Charity concert. **MERTHYR PLUGGED IN TEAM**



The Oratorios

We spoke to Tom and Richard from The Oratorios who are a five-piece band from Merthyr, who have only been together with the current members for about eight months. The band have been inspired by a large genre of bands like The Jam, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and The Arctic Monkeys. They started the band out of boredom because they had nothing to do around the house. We asked them how long have they been writing their own material and Richard told us he writes all the songs and has been writing them for the last three or four years. They said they want to go as far as they can with the band, and their dream gig would be in the Millennium Stadium because they would be playing in front of a home crowd. They didn't choose the genre that they play, Richard just takes the lyrics into band practice and the rest of the guys helps to put in the music. This collaboration works well – and anyone who has seen these guys play live will know what we mean! www.myspace.com/theoratorios



Fusebox

Fusebox are made up of four band members, Ben (vocals/guitar), Ian (drums), Clunky (guitar), Frankie (bass guitar). Ben is the one who writes most of the songs and told me, of those he doesn't write himself he's the one in the band who okays them. Ben also told me that the way he starts with a new song is with playing riffs, linking into a song, then lastly adding on the lyrics, how and when the feeling takes him. As a band, Fusebox have been together for two years, getting together after Ben put an ad on a music website. Their first ever gig was at a social club in Merthyr, but they've since played the Belle Vue and are now aiming for the bigger clubs in Pontypool. The style of music they attempt to play is blues rock, 60s style, but Ben told me: "It doesn't sound like what it's supposed to – it sounds better!" Ian butted in saying: "I have the dirtiest, stickiest job in the band – as the drummer." This is a band for any blues-rock connoisseur to go and watch. **RICHARD H**



Merthyr PLUGGED IN gig Belle Vue

It was a cold rainy night outside the Bell Vue in Merthyr Tydfil, while inside the pub the evening was hotting up. A great live gig was just about to start for Merthyr PLUGGED IN, five live bands were performing and the atmosphere was electric with a tremendous excitement in the room, which was full of eager gig-goers. Compere for the night was PLUGGED IN's very own Creative Director Darren Warner — who has a voice loud enough for public speaking! Also present was Editor Gail Griffiths, who at the end of the night thanked everyone for coming to support such a special event — especially the five acts who all played the gig for free.

First up was Sunshine Satellites, an acoustic duo who set a very high standard for the others to follow. Not only was their performance fun and enjoyable, their vocals were pitch perfect as they harmonised together. A great start to the night! As we in PLUGGED IN like to mix things up a bit, the second act was the wonderful 3Gs Community Choir. The assembled 20 or so youngsters gave us a beautiful rendition of *Hallelujah* amongst the three magical numbers they performed, beautifully arranged with each choir member singing their part in turn in a different key, much to the audience's pleasure.

Next on was local folk singer and contributor to Merthyr PLUGGED IN, Karen Moore. The audience gave Karen an outstanding welcome before she sang three of her popular songs. The first, *Nothing Stays The Same*, was a folk melody that took us back over the years to the Summer of Love, when Vietnam, Martin Luther King and men were dancing on the Moon, a peaceful and relaxing melody which was well received by the audience. The atmosphere settled down as Karen sang *Worth The Wait*, a quiet and relaxing ballad expressing the pain and hurt of relationships. Karen writes from her inner feelings, words we can all relate to, which suits all ages. There was great applause for this number expressing the excitement in the room. The third folk song *Life*, was an up-tempo catchy tune about the experiences of the heart. This lively folk song ended Karen's performance to great applause.

The Epaulettes turned the venue into a feast of brilliant noise as they pumped through their riotous rock 'n' roll set. Never ones to slow down, they launched through song after song coming to the end of their time too soon for this reviewer. Fun, enjoyable and downright gritty in places they had move the performance notch up to a different level and it was up to local heroes The Oratorios to beat that. Which they did with the slickness of a performance that was more akin to a larger venue than the small one we had offered them! Highly professional, they delivered us with hints of The Jam crossed over with indie Brit rock topped off with their own unique style. Treading the boards for a few years now it is totally amazing that The Oratorios haven't been picked up by a record label, because these boys don't disappoint when they play live. In fact I'll go as far to say they won't allow themselves to disappoint — they are that good!

Tonight Merthyr PLUGGED IN tried to showcase the variety of talent that was found within a short distance from the Glamorgan Gates HQ, highlighting the potential Merthyr Tydfil has to offer the world. Believe me the world better watch out!

THE MERTHYR PLUGGED IN TEAM

Merthyr Live Reviews

Over the period that I worked on the Merthyr PLUGGED IN project I watched a number of bands at different locations throughout the town. Firstly I saw The Boogiemen at The Great Escape who played old-style rock 'n' roll, honky tonk music. They were tight, and sounded like the Eagles. Mellow! I found the performance very enjoyable, though most of what they played I didn't recognise, so I took it as original numbers. The second half seemed as if every other song was a Rolling Stones track. Funny as a lot of the time they were slugging off the English. Aren't the Stones English?

The next gig was the Black Dogs at The Crown. The first half was made up of the more eccentric side of rock, consisting of David Bowie, U2, Run DMC...slightly on the edge of the rock fraternity. After a short break they came back on, cranked up the volume and let rip, playing the heavier side of rock. The musicianship was good and they produced a good sound.

Finally I went to watch Vertigo, again at the Great Escape who opened with the U2 track of the same name. Initially carrying on with the same style of music, they then went on to the more mature type of rock. Mostly mellow. They played a good version of *Parisienne Walkways* by Gary Moore and ended the concert on an equally good version of Whitesnake's *Here I Go Again*. A good, all round set, well played and a enjoyable evening.

RICHARD H



Glamorgan GATES is a partnership between the University of Glamorgan and the Communities First Unit of the Welsh Assembly Government. It is both the concept of a "gateway" between the university and the community and a physical presence, the GATES Centre, sited in Merthyr Tydfil. The project is aimed at all sections of the community, but we also focus on people who may be disengaged from the community. We strive to develop imaginative and innovative methods of lifelong learning through activities and events rather than formal learning frameworks. This will be developed and facilitated in partnership with local groups and individuals to ensure relevance and appropriateness to the needs of the local community. These activities will be wide ranging and are likely to include topics within the arts, science, technology, media, sport or work based learning.

It is now generally recognised that "...cultural activity should be regarded as an essential part of community regeneration". Glamorgan GATES will therefore aim to provide "cultural activity" in the broadest possible sense by drawing on local traditions and customs in areas noted, historically, for their capacity to create their own culture and, also, reflecting more contemporary interests and concerns. Initially the focus will be on encouraging engagement with learning in a non-challenging way to build confidence, develop self-esteem and broaden horizons to promote personal and community capacity for development and change. In the long term, Glamorgan GATES will seek to make a significant impact on the currently low levels of educational attainment and participation

in further or higher education in valley based communities.

GATES is characterised by community involvement in the development of creative ideas and in the creation of projects. It is a collaborative process where the community and the GATES team aim to have equal contribution. GATES is committed to working closely with Communities First Partnerships and other local interest groups in the Merthyr Borough. Glamorgan GATES welcomes people dropping in to express their interest in any subject. We keep a database which records peoples' expressions of interest so that when we have enough numbers for a particular topic, if viable, we endeavour to run a class in it. If you have any ideas for future workshops please feel free to drop in!

Workshops we are currently running or will be running in the near future include:

- Business Start-Up Surgeries
- Art Drop-In Sessions
- IT Tasters
- Portuguese Dancing
- Creative Writing
- Belly Dancing
- Merthyr Aloud Community Choir
- Monthly Open Mic Nights
- Guitar Lessons
- Sound Engineering
- Meditation

If you'd like to find out more please call Jenna on 01685 729940, email gates@glam.ac.uk or drop into the GATES shop, 121 High Street, Merthyr Tydfil CF47 8BL.

Participants of the Merthyr PLUGGED IN Project, found themselves face-to-face with a huge name in music – Merthyr-bred Radio 1 featured band The Blackout. Budding journalists and photographers Taylor and Alex interviewed lead singer Sean Smith, drummer Gareth Lawrence and guitarist Matthew Davies before joining them for a photo shoot. Quite a scoop for their first ever interview!

The project, run in association with PLUGGED IN magazine, took place during July and August in Glamorgan GATES. Merthyr PLUGGED IN aims to tie in with the magazine's objectives by specifically offering media opportunities to people in Merthyr Tydfil. The project involved six weeks of writing and photography workshops, including a trip to Red Dragon Radio and the ATRiUM in Cardiff, the culmination is this magazine. An exhibition of photography currently on display at Glamorgan GATES celebrates contributors' achievements.

MANAGING EDITOR & PUBLISHER
Gail Griffiths

CREATIVE DIRECTOR & CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER
Darren Warner

PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR
Lisa Derrick

MAIN PARTICIPANTS
Alex England, Andrew Cooper, Bethan Lewis, Bradley Walston, Brandon White, Breda Ethelstone, Janice Jones, Karen Moore, Richard H, Scott Lyndley, Taylor Bradley