

Pearls of wisdom from an Oyster

interview by Rod Campbell

The Oyster Band is touted as the best folk band in Britain at the moment. That's no mean feat, and it happens to be true — according to the latest poll in the prestigious UK magazine *Folk Roots*. In the last few years, the Oysters have emerged as the front runners in the vibrant roots scene currently underway in the British Isles. Folk? Roots? A matter of semantics? Not according to bassist Ian Kearey: "Roots is probably to the eighties what Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span

written about. I think that's what folk music has been and should be."

The nucleus of the Oyster Band was created at the University of Kent — circa 1974-79. Playing mostly ceilidhs, the group membership included anywhere up to thirteen musicians "depending on how many were available." At the height of the Celtic renaissance in the late seventies, reels and jigs were a mandatory part of any folk act. As an alternative, the Oyster Band started to play English dance music. "We discovered a lot of music that hadn't received the same exposure."

With the arrival of vocal and melodeon player John Jones, the band began to move away from performing at ceilidhs and concentrated more on concerts. "Before we met him, he had been singing and playing melodeon around the clubs," explains Kearey. "He showed us there was a lot of terrific English songs we had never heard of. So we thought 'these are great songs why don't we start arranging them.' We started singing them in between dances while people were taking a break and having a beer."

The songs became more popular than the dance tunes. The natural progression was for Jones, and fiddler Ian Telfer, to write their own material — a bigger challenge than arranging traditional material. Kearey finds "it's easy to take a song from the tradition. You have the lyrics and the tune there for you. You can play around with it if you like. To say something yourself requires a lot more skill."

The Oyster Band has a lot to say; they're a band with a political edge that is almost subliminal. Singing songs such as "Ashes to Ashes" — inspired by a village council who built an outdoor toilet on a nuclear bomb



The Oyster Band, said to be the best folk bank in Britain.

"It's actually hip to talk about folk...in the rock press. Five or ten years ago people would have said 'oh no! we can't be bothered with that.'"

were to the late sixties. It's a different music really. Bands like Fairport and Steeleye came out of the rock scene and moved towards folk. Bands like ourselves came out of the folkscene and are moving towards rock.

"Folk rock in the past has been pretty nostalgic. It was looking at a world that never was. The pretty milkmaids and ploughboys, Green England. That time never existed! If you look at traditional songs a lot of them are very bitter. They can be an alternative to the view you get in history books. It's a look from underneath often a very cynical one. We are more in common with what punk was originally in terms of the aims. It was a view from underneath, not the official view that's

shelter — to a seering version of Billy Bragg's "Between the Wars" the Oysters have the canny knack of getting the message across without preaching. "We find the political scene in Britain at the moment such, that it would seem rather false of us not to mention it," says Kearey. "We see ourselves as an antidote to our great Prime Minister who visited here recently. We are presenting the other point as best as we can."

The Oyster's point of view is obviously being listened to. Their last album *Step Outside* was voted second only to Paul Simon's *Graceland* in a recent poll, and their current release *Wild Blue Yonder* currently sits firmly on top of Britain's folk charts. Another satisfying factor for Kearey is the young audience the band is now attracting. "The average age of our audiences have dropped by about fifteen years," he says with a laugh. The folk scene is now being looked upon by the rock press as an alternative to the flavour-of-the-month mentality associ-

ated with commercial music; which might explain the renewed interest in folk based music. "It's actually hip to talk about folk and folk influences in the rock press. Five or ten years ago people would have said 'oh no! we can't be bothered with that!'"

A big factor for the band's wider acceptance has been the inclusion of drummer Russell Lax, whose potent drumming has beefed up the band's rhythm section. "Russell was a natural thing for us to do," adds Kearey. "The way the song structures were going seemed to suggest that we needed percussion or drums of some sort. We asked him if he would do a session for the *Step Outside* album, and he said sure. He just came in cold with no preconceived notions of folk music, and that has been a refreshing benefit to us all."

The Oyster Band play Dinwoodie Lounge, Thursday night with Michelle Shocked. Look for an interview with Shocked in Thursday's Gateway.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
TICKET SALES BEGIN \$11.00		COUNTRY HEAVEN ON SALE INCAB 9-13		ROCK DANCE AT THE RENFORD INN ON WHYTE	COW DRAWING	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
ECONOMY BEER	BEER	SOCIAL	BAR NONE PARADE	CAB RALLY	CERES FARMHOUSE DANCE	BAR NONE
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
				DINWOODIE LOUNGE	No Minors — Age I.D. Required	