

Bob Kettle of Merry Hell: Exclusive In-Depth Interview with Festivals For All

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FFA were delighted to chat with one of the scene's most amiable characters, Bob Kettle of Merry Hell. We discovered what makes him and the band tick, including some surprising influences - Leonard Cohen, Marx & Engels, and Littlewood's Catalogue all play their part! Now read on...

FFA - Not only are you Mandolin player with the band but you have strong song-writing credentials too... How did your musical career develop?

We started learning to play, me and my brother John, about 12-13 old, after looking in my mams shopping catalogue and we saw pictures of electronic guitars – we both said wouldn't it be good to have one of those yer know. We went down to the local second-hand shop and got the cheapest electronic guitars you've ever seen ... plus amplifiers for a tenner for two.... Not having the ability to play anyone else's songs – we just started playing our own stuff! Honestly, our first forays into writing were because we couldn't play anyone else's songs! (laughs). In those days the punk thing was happening and you were encouraged to learn 3 chords and form a band – well we didn't even know one chord & still formed a band! We didn't let our lack of knowing 3 chords hold us back! A very solid beginning! (laughs again)

Also, this was a time when Thatcher was in power – we felt we did not have jobs or hopes of jobs – we felt ourselves to be under attack and that the best way to fight back, or at least not be defeated, would be if we could not make any money then at least we could make music... We've been influenced by so many people over the years of course - Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, but I think what really keeps me writing is the knowledge that the maddest, craziest most unhinged part of myself is what's needed for writing songs .. It's that pure will to express something new - but also connect to audiences too... The most wonderful thing for any writer is being on stage in a band performing your songs, and when the bands performing it does not really feel like yours anymore – it belongs to the band... but when you hear the audience singing it back – you know it belongs to them too yer know. That's the satisfaction.

With the creative versus playing live balance - one feeds into the other – whereas the writing part of it can very personal & insular – the performing is very public and very social and just bags of fun. We've seen you perform Bob! interjected FFA. You'll notice I'm smiling all over my face! That might not be just the music Bob – but we'll leave it there, we say. (he roars with laughter)



FFA - Merry Hell evolved from the much loved Tansads – what were the reasons behind creating Merry Hell after that Tansads reunion concert in 2010 – and why did it take you so long?

I think that after we'd finished with The Tansads – one of the reasons the band finished was that many of us had got tired of the music industry and that can distract you from the real genuine reasons that made you start writing in the first place. None of us actually stopped writing but many of us did stop wanting to bother with the selling of the music and we all had different stuff to do. John went into recording and production. I started studying and eventually teaching etc. People wanted to

do different things and it probably took that long to realise how much all of us had missed playing together and also realise that we hadn't been forgotten about. I think these things happen when the time is right I think it's probably the best decision we ever made. We did think that everyone had forgotten The Tansads and I was terrified no one was going to come to the gig yer know. I came out on stage and just saw all my old mates and familiar faces. It all started again from there. Then we discovered we loved it and we got Merry Hell really.

FFA - You feature the excellent Tansads classic "Iron Man" on the new album – are you comfortable with The Tansads history still being a key reference point for the band?

Although many members were in The Tansads - not all of us were – and it seemed to be the decent thing to change the name in honour on the members that weren't in Merry Hell... Do the decent thing and not pretend it is the same band. Having said that we are absolutely proud of The Tansads and if people want to access the band by means of that memory then they are more than welcome. So in as much as we want to show the world that this is a new band - we can't, and don't want to, escape our history.

FFA – how would you define the differences between the two bands?

One of the key differences is that we now have one of the singers who is making a major contribution to the writing – Virginia Kettle. She's added a new perspective to the band. She writes so beautifully. I think we've got a different perspective in her writing...also including a former Tansad, Lee Goulding on keyboards and he's involved in writing. Plus the fact we are older and more mature has led us to take on more nuanced and polished writing but without losing any of the soul and energy that carried along The Tansads.

FFA - Merry Hell are a great live band with a strong following – some of your audience appear to go on tour with you! Is it fair to say you've added a new audience whilst keeping your original fans? *We are delighted to bring the original Tansads fans along with us and that's been a real test – that the people that used to like us still like us. It also a real delight to see just as many, or even more, new faces in the crowd. It's a pleasure that we get many people at the gigs who had never even heard of The Tansads.*

FFA - Tell us a little about the new album – Head Full Of Magic, Shoes Full Of Rain.

It comes out early May! (laughs) I think a second album can be a bit of a tall order for many bands because they put so much into the first one and the demand for a second comes very quickly... it can be very hard for them. For us it been a real pleasure to find we had more than enough songs to do a second album. All of us are writing all of the time. Virginia has been particularly prolific. Because many of us had played together previously and Merry Hell has been together two years now – we've really got to know each other and it's allowed us to put together songs more organically. The songs and the bones of the music have come together very easily. My brother John has worked his absolute magic as a producer. So that combination of knowing each other, playing together, and having a world class producer in the band has really helped the album get itself together.

FFA - The album features the musical god that is Dave Swarbrick – do you welcome collaborations with other artists in future?

I love that idea – it's a huge honour Dave Swarbrick wanted to play... he's someone we've held in huge respect for years – it's a huge complement artists like that even listen to your music without actually wanting to play on the record! (laughs). Gordon Giltrap – he's going to playing with us in the coming months. It's a way of not only meeting your heroes yer know (laughs again), but also communicating with the bigger world of music.

FFA - Does One song on the new album epitomises what the band is about?

Of course we believe in all of the songs, but if I was forced to choose just one it would probably be the first track on the album, "Loving The Skin You're In"..... That's about individuals accepting who they are, expressing who they are, loving themselves and being part of a community. Those ideas are actually a major part of what goes into making the band and part of what we are trying to say really.

FFA – You speak passionately about your roots and socialist ideals – how does that impact you as an artist?

For me it's absolutely part and parcel of it. I'm speaking just for myself personally now - politics and relationships of power between people are absolutely fundamental to life. I believe in joining in and engaging with politics because by that means I'm taking on responsibility for my own political outlook. I believe in communities and everything I've said about the band I would say about socialism... especially in a time when the rich are making money at the expense of the poor I think we need to stand up and defend ourselves. It's important to remember though that that's my class position and you mustn't exclude anyone else's position.

FFA - you're mid tour and have lots of festival appearances lined up in 2013 ... including Off The Tracks – which is something rather special isn't it?

Yes we absolutely love playing there – we always have a fantastic time. To cap off that particular weekend I've a solo gig on the Bank Holiday Monday at the Dog & Partridge in Marchington with the excellent Stuart Forester ... so it's all go, yer know!

So there you have it; the excellent Mister (Smiley) Bob Kettle, raconteur, funny, passionate, articulate, man of the people – and home shopper!

The new Merry Hell Album "Head Full Of Magic, Shoes Full Of Rain" is out early May and is available [HERE](#) along with band details.

Article by Barrie Dimond

***For blistering folk-rock with a soft velvety underbelly, try www.merryhell.co.uk
Latest album "Head Full of Magic, Shoes Full of Rain"
[CLICK HERE FOR OUR NEW VIDEO: 'LOVING THE SKIN YOU'RE IN'](#)***