

Jon Langford

The worldly musician talks about seeing the American South through a Welshman's eyes, and making music in these 'Trumpy' times

BY JASON COHEN
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In 2016, as Donald Trump was emerging as the 45th president of the nation, Mekons co-founder Jon Langford was getting ready to go down to Alabama, where the legendary bassist and producer Norbert Putnam had invited him to make a record. The Welshmen-turned-Chicagoan first met the Muscle Shoals legend at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, where they both participated in an ambitious exhibition called "Dylan, Cash, and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City." Langford was there because of his work as a visual artist – a large portion of his paintings deconstruct, celebrate and excavate the history of American music, especially as it intersects with race, class and economic exploitation. In otherwords, the history of American music.

For the occasion, Langford – who also leads the alternative country band Waco Brothers and fronts a variety of solo backing bands – formed a whole new group, Four Lost Souls, with guitarist John Szymanski and singers Bethany Thomas and Tawny Newsome. The resulting self-titled album features songs about America and the South that have little to do with the election, but carry the weight of both history and current events. A second record is already in the works.

In the meantime, Langford also got back together with the original line-up of the punk band The Mekons (now known as The Mekons '77) recently, while the band's current edition is set to release an album (maybe two) in 2019. Langford's been to Portland to play music and show some of his artwork twice in the last three months, including a recent gig with Szymanski opening for Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale Gilmore at the Aladdin. Street Roots spoke to him on two different occasions, covering everything from Trump and Brexit to Chicago politics, millennials and why music is work.

Jason Cohen: I did not originally realize that you made the *Four Lost Souls* record mere days after the election.

Jon Langford: Yeah, I had to take two pretty political black women down to Alabama. They thought there was going to be fisticuffs. They were actually scared, as well they should be. I'm just an old white bloke, I didn't think much about it. It's a different experience. America is different: really different. I have to keep reminding myself that. I fucking hate this Trump period.

J.C.: One takeaway from a lot of women and people of color was, "It's always been like this. That feeling you had when you woke up after the election? That was us



Jon Langford, far left, and his bandmates with the *Four Lost Souls* – John Szymanski, Bethany Thomas and Tawny Newsome.

PHOTO BY MIKE KOSIŃSKI

already."

J.L.: Yeah, exactly. Maybe it's providing me with an education. Even just going back to Wales (with *Four Lost Souls*), a lot of times the assumption will be that I'm the singer, and they're the backing singers. I said we should do a documentary, call it "20 Feet From an Idiot."

But Muscle Shoals was great. We didn't have any issues. I mean, Norbert voted for Bernie Sanders. And David Hood, who was playing the bass ... he was like, "I read the Manchester Guardian every day." We were removed from the bubble of Chicago to another bubble, which just happened to be in Alabama. There was a gay black couple having a birthday party in the wine bar where we went after the first session. Tawny said she saw one Confederate flag: at the bottom of a plate of fried chicken.

The songwriting on the album was really about being given the opportunity to go to Muscle Shoals, and to the South at this really kind of weird, difficult time.

There's a dual history to the South for me, which is like, all the best things and all the worst things kind of come from there. The classic period of Muscle Shoals was this kind of amazing time, where it was a very colorblind culture. It represents some kind of pre-assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a cultural coming together, which I think was pretty much lost after that. So I wanted to write about my experiences in the South.

J.C.: You've lived in America for more than 20 years.

J.L.: Every time I go back to Britain I have to explain myself. "How could you live there? It's terrible!" Especially now. I'm just intensely interested

in lots of things in America. We'd been coming so much (with the Mekons), and there was just stuff that I wanted to discover. If you were a kid growing up in postwar England, it's all about America and American TV.

There's a song on the *Four Lost Souls* album. "What's My Name?" Muhammad Ali: We kind of learned about America through him. I wasn't interested in boxing really, but he was just this larger-than-life character who made up little poems and then beat everyone up. He was kind of like the real Superman. He was incredibly popular in Britain, and that popularity continued through his fall. I didn't know anything about Vietnam War. I didn't know anything about racism in America. When they stripped him of his title people were really shocked. I remember thinking, as he was going through all that shit, "Why are they doing that to him? Don't they realize he's brilliant?"

J.C.: Your politics and your class consciousness, that preceded making art and music, right? Just growing up?

J.L.: It did for me. My mother's side of the family were working class: coal miners and steel people and stuff like that. But they were Old Labor working class. Y'know, possibly a bit conservative in their Laboriness.

But living in Newport, when I was about 14 or 15, I met a bunch of people who were more into like, active-trade unionism, and gay rights, and the Welsh nationalist Left. So by the time I went up to Leeds (for school), I knew where I stood.

And Leeds was very political – that whole student union, where we hung out every day, there was something going on all the time. Like, it's "Chile solidarity disco night." Pretty soon after that, Rock

J.L.: Yeah, people were fairly correctly pissed off with politicians. Brexit was framed as a vote for change, because the sitting prime minister called the vote. (David Cameron) was inviting people to punch him in the face. Basically, "If he's for (the EU) then we want something else" He thought he was going to solve all these problems, and instead he's pushed the country off a cliff. It's going to really harm things, I think. I don't think there's a future for Britain outside of Europe.

The Trump thing was the same sort of forces. It'd have been much better if Bernie Sanders could have harnessed those forces because, rightfully, there's a lot of dissatisfaction. I mean, I was delighted when Obama was elected. I thought it was this huge change that could never be reversed. This is the backwash of that event.

And they kind of deserved it, really. There was a lot of things that went on in those eight years that really pissed me off, including the fact that (Obama) did a deal with the Clintons in the first place. Those aren't good people, I don't think. The right wing of the Democratic Party is just in league with the money people, and it never really ends well. So I guess I'm just slightly off the map when it comes to politics still. Now the best you can hope for is that this is a big blip.

J.C.: There'd been so much much progressive energy in Chicago against Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who worked with both the Clintons and Obama and has since announced he won't seek a third term. But at the same time that was going on, America got smacked in the face with this other thing.

J.L.: Yeah. I have doubts that someone like Trump and Rahm are that different. There's this cosmetic social liberalism that masks what's really going on. What Rahm does ... it's volatile to use terms like "fascism," but Mussolini defined fascism as corporate. Corporations and government, working together. It just feels like democracy hasn't really lived up to its duty of reigning in unbridled capitalism.

J.C.: It's a bit like that in Portland. There's never any threat of an actual Republican becoming mayor, but (office holders) are still serving developers and the chamber of commerce.

J.L.: That's it in Chicago. If anyone's a bit right-wing and pro-business, they're going to join the Democratic Party, because they want power. Although, there's a Trumpy element working its way into city politics too. Mainly through police and firemen. Trump's popular in those circles.

People have tried to paint this as, the white working class has got behind him. And I'm sure some of them did. But there's a lot of other people in this country, and there's a lot of money in this country. People are very greedy, and they want more. It's not the have-nots that are supporting him. It's the haves as well. It's just the core American idea of "Fuck everyone else. I'm all right."

J.C.: You've got two nearly-grown sons now. Was there ever a moment where it looked like they'd rebel, politically or musically?

J.L.: Always. Always rebelling! I mean, I don't think they were going to join the Republican party or anything like that. But they have their own opinions about things. I like that generation. I think they're quite radical, and quite thoughtful, but there's a sort of built-in level of narcissism and materialism. It's just the water they swim in. The "branding."

I mean, both my sons love hip-hop and rap music. I listen to it too, but sometimes there's a relentless kind of narcissism and misogyny. It gets to the point where I'm like, "can we switch that off now?" I think they put it on to see how much I can take.

J.C.: Knowing how Brexit had gone, and how that played in Wales especially, did you see the parallels with Trump?

J.C.: Takes a lot to offend you.

J.L.: They found a way! I'm offended by stupid shit. And there's a lot of stupid shit out there.

It's also interesting how they can explain away things on levels of irony. "I'm listening to this ironically." "Well, go and listen to it ironically in your bedroom!"

J.C.: It feels like you can't ethically use any media or consume any products in the world right now.

J.L.: There's organic cheeses I could get behind.

J.C.: And then you find out that it's made by underpaid prisoners in Colorado or something.

J.L.: No! Not the Welsh stuff! That'd be terrible if all the good Welsh cheeses were made by prisoners in Colorado.

It's difficult, and it was like that when punk rock started. That was our issue. Do we want to be part of this commercial music business, this pop business? Why are we making records? Why are we doing anything? A lot of it was because it's cool. It's cool to have a record out, and have people who like your music and listen to it. On that simple level, you'd be very arrogant not to go make music.

But then within two years of forming the Mekons we were corporate employees at Virgin Records, stifled in every imaginable way that we hadn't thought of. By the Nice Benevolent Hippie Richard Branson, who's still trying to save the world.

J.C.: It's crazy to think that back then, and especially in the '90s, people could still think, "we're gonna form a band and we're gonna get signed and that's gonna be it."

J.L.: We did it a couple of times, and those were basically the worst times: when it was like a job. That's when it was crap. And the best times, and the most creative times, were when we were doing things while no one was looking.

J.C.: You turned 60 last year. You make your living as much from visual art as music, but you're still in more bands than ever, and play more gigs than ever. Is it physically more challenging?

J.L.: No. I mean to be honest, it's easier. We've just worked out how to do it. It was a lot harder when we used to come for those big long tours of the United States, traveling in a van, hotels every night. We didn't really look after ourselves at all. Now, we did a month with *Four Last Souls* and it was just really relaxing for me. There was some bits that were a tiring, but it wasn't like, "I can't wait to get home and rest."

I mean, I enjoy doing it. I've developed some skills, where I can go to Portland and play for two hours just with a guitar, and have it not be completely boring for everybody involved, or terrifying for me. If I've got an acoustic guitar and a box of my little art prints I can go anywhere, and break even at worst. I imagine I will just continue doing it until I drop dead. I mean, that's the plan. Haven't really got a retirement worked out.