

# A STAND-UP GUY

Tom Povey hears how Ray 'Chopper' Cooper confounded conventional expectation by transforming the cello into a thoroughly rock'n'roll – or at least, folk-rock – instrument



When I first met Ray Cooper in 2008, he was the energetic bass player with the award-winning Oysterband who also played the cello, standing up and moving around. He released a debut solo album in 2010, *Tales Of Love, War & Death By Hanging* recorded in his log cabin studio in Sweden, and gave a small number of live performances.

In 2013, he announced he was leaving Oysterband to go solo. After a second album in 2014, *Palace Of Tears*, Ray released his third record, *Between The Golden Age & The Promised Land*, last year on which he sang and played all the instruments. I asked Ray how he felt his music has changed over the last six years.

“When I made the first album, because it was a new thing to me, I didn’t really know how many choices I had about which direction to go. I relied more on traditional material. That was good in a way as it gave the first album a very strong flavour. Then as time progressed I experimented to see what other song subjects I could tackle. I realised that songwriting is a continual exploration of what is possible. I want to see what I can do. For the third album I wanted to get a simpler sound, to focus everything down.”

The second and third albums increasingly contained more of Ray’s own compositions. He describes himself as a story-led songwriter. Where does he get the

inspirations for his songs? Where do the stories come from?

“From different things – memories, conversations, reading newspapers and books, from travelling. The solitude of driving is very good at giving me time to think. I will jot ideas down, often little snippets that I use later. On the first album, my song ‘The Puritan’ started as an instrumental tune. I was looking at old Swedish hymn tunes for another project and that was one that really stuck in my mind.

“I started playing around with it. I changed the time signature and took the liberty of altering it. I recorded it with just the harmonica playing the tune. When I played it back, it struck me as sounding like the theme to an old cowboy film. This is not surprising really as the early cowboy films did use a lot of hymn tunes for their film music. I just put it on a peg and gave it the working title of ‘The Puritan’ because the tune came from 1598, the time of the Reformation.

“Later I started thinking about the English Civil War, likening it to a cowboy film. The song begins with the guy loading up his saddlebags and heading off to the West,

which is the typical beginning to an old-fashioned cowboy film. I mixed in my own reading of the Civil War but told a very simple story. It was the easiest song I’ve ever written. It only took a couple of hours to write the lyrics.

“On the third album, the song ‘The Unknown Soldier Has A Name’ is one I’m quite pleased with. It came as a commission from the Muziekcentrum in Dranouter in Holland, as part of a songwriting project about the First World War. I was given the biography of a soldier and asked to write a song about him. It was such an interesting story about a soldier who was shot for disobeying orders even though he was one of the bravest men in the company and very useful in battle.

“They decided to shoot him because he had no respect for his officers. I thought it was a story worth telling. Then I was staying at a house in Germany and there was an old mandolin lying on top of a piano. It had belonged to a man who died in the First World War. I decided to combine the story of a German soldier who had played the mandolin with the English soldier who was shot at dawn.”

Ray spent almost twenty-five years with Oysterband, and has some great memories of his time with the band: “Great experiences in the studio with Al Scott producing; adventurous touring; driving a

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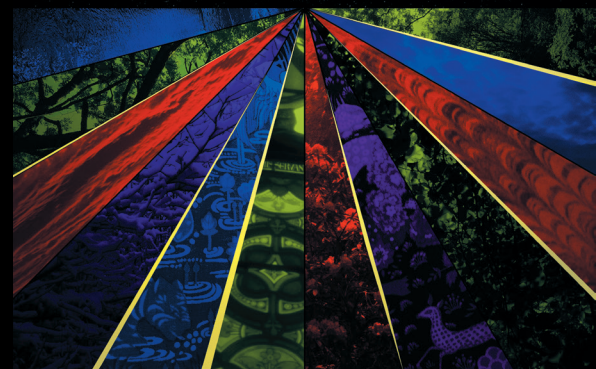
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Winnebago through the Rockies in the winter; backstage tables laden with fish in Spain. Lots of good times and audiences singing along. It was a great experience but there comes a time to move on and I'm glad I did."

How did he start playing the cello? Not an instrument generally associated with folk or folk-rock.

"Initially I played bass guitar and harmonica. I came to the cello later, when I was twenty-one. When I decided to become a musician, I wanted to have an acoustic instrument like a bass guitar and the cello seemed an obvious choice. I saw no one else using one except that it was used in pop and film music. I remember just before I got the cello, I went to see the film *Jaws* which features cello a lot. When you hear that sound in a cinema pounding through big speakers you realise what a powerful and versatile instrument it is.

"I joined Oysterband as a bass player and harmony singer. We went straight into the studio. As soon as they found I played cello they wanted me to try it to fit in with their folk influences. The very first song I played cello on with them was 'This Year Next Year' on the album *Ride*.

"The first time I played it on stage, I sat down. Then John Jones, the singer, asked, 'Can't you play it standing up?' and I said, 'No, it's not possible; no one plays the cello standing up.' He replied, 'Well, try.' The spike wasn't long enough so I put a box on stage and put the spike on the box. Then I realised that I did want to play it standing up. Firstly, I was used to moving around as a bass player. Also, I was a backing vocalist so I like to move in and out of the microphone. It's easier to sing standing up.

"I went to a local builders' merchants and got a length of nine-millimetre steel, cut it to the exact length of the inside of the cello so that it didn't fall in, went out into the street and sharpened it on a paving stone. Then I had to learn to play it standing up, it's very different to playing sat down. I realised I had to practise, standing up. I'm still learning."

Affectionately known as Chopper, how did he end up with his nickname?

"It came from way back when I was with a punk band called Amazorblades. I'd just got hold of a cello and was trying to practise it. We had this expression, 'to get your chops', which means 'to get

in practise'. I was really trying to 'get my chops' on the cello so they started calling me Chopper. Also at that time, I became aware that there was another musician called Ray Cooper, a percussionist – who is still around. When we made our first record I thought it better to use the name Chopper rather than Ray Cooper to avoid confusion."

On tour he plays a lot of house concerts. What attracted him to performing in such intimate settings?

"House concerts are a great test. They are the performance equivalent of bare-knuckle boxing. You stand or fall. However, it's easier than you might think. The audience is often not a regular concert-going audience; usually friends, relatives and neighbours of the host. For most of them, the experience of going to a close acoustic show is completely new. That makes them a really receptive audience. They also feel relaxed because they are in a friend's house. I really like getting to talk with people. There is no backstage. I stay with the host and meet people with many different jobs."

Cooper has lived in Sweden since

2000 but comes back to tour the U.K. (When we chat he's just starting a fortnight of British dates.) "I'm always excited about coming back to England. English audiences are always very lively and talkative to me after shows. I'm going to Wales for the first time on this tour, which I'm very pleased about. It's another country for me to visit, which is lovely.

"After the tour I go back home and carry on working on new material. Then after Easter, I have a short tour of Germany and in the autumn a much longer tour of Germany and Denmark. I have a house concert tour in Western Canada in January 2020, which I'm really excited about. I toured there with Oysterband and this is my first solo tour."

As for his decision to go solo, so long into his musical career: "It's enabled me to expand the type of songs I write and the instruments I play. I've added guitar, mandolin, piano and church organ to the bass guitar, harmonica and cello. I'm glad that I've managed to get this far with just a lot of grassroots support. It proves that it is possible." ❖

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