

Jon Swayne

(from Blowzabella's **'New Tunes for Dancing'** (2004 - 2010))

My fascination with music goes back as far as I can remember – wanting to play my grandmother's piano when I could hardly reach the keys – being given a penny whistle when still in a cot. I learnt piano and flute at school, and though I went into law for lack of any clear idea of what I wanted to do, I kept up playing flute, and took up saxophone, eventually developing a parallel semi-professional musical career, doing a mixture of classical, big band and amateur operatics/musicals. Amongst other things, I played in scratch orchestras for the annual shows of amateur operatic companies, the Bath Youth Orchestra, which later became the Philharmonia of Bath, a big band based at the local British Legion club, and another big band in Bristol run by trumpeter Harry Smith, as well as a chamber group, the Wessex Wind Ensemble. This went on for over 10 years until I finally plucked up the nerve to give up law, or perhaps, before I acknowledged the fact that if I didn't I might die an early death of sheer boredom. In the mid-70's I met some people who were playing early music, and at the same time did a wood-turning course. From this was born the thought that there might be a future in making early woodwinds, especially baroque flutes. To cut a long story short, in 1977 I got myself onto the course at the London College of Furniture, and started there less than three weeks after leaving my desk at the office. The relief, elation and excitement cannot be described.

Also on the woodwind course at LCF was Bill O'Toole from Sydney, Australia. His background was a maths degree, some woodturning, and playing recorder and folk flute and whistle. He'd learnt a lot of Irish tunes from John Doonan records and before long he was teaching them to me. At the same time, Guy Crayford (who later occasionally sat in with Blowzabella) was doing the violin course, and organised Tuesday lunchtime Irish sessions in one of the equipment lift shafts. Between him and Bill it was a great introduction to folk music, and I soon decided that it was a lot more interesting than what I had so far been able to discover about the early music scene. Bill's ambition was to make a set of bagpipes based on what he could find out about early English and Flemish pipes. By the end of that first year, he had something working and we started playing together; at that time I was playing a little D flute. At the beginning of the first summer holiday, Bill and I took a trip to Belgium. Walking out of Bruges looking for a lift, we were picked up by a couple going to Dranouter Folk Festival; they invited us along, offering us the hospitality of their scout tent. At the festival we found that one of the main acts was none other than John Doonan, plus some people playing wonderful music on bagpipes, hurdy-gurdies and button accordion. When I asked them where they and the music were from they said "Berry". "Where's that?" I said. "Central France", they said. In my notebook I wrote down some of the tunes, which became the beginnings of our French music repertoire. Completely new to us, this music was part of the answer to our search for great dance tunes which could be played on the one octave range of Bill's pipes. Back in London at the start of the new academic year, we started to look for musicians to join us, and several important things came together. First, Bill made me a set of pipes. Second, Dave Armitage joined the woodwind course; it turned out he played melodeon and knew a fantastic amount about English dance and calling. Third, we soon met several musicians who were interested in the type of music we wanted to play; Juan Wijngaard, who had the first non-celtic bagpipe I'd ever seen (apart from Bill's) – a Flemish type, and a hurdy-gurdy he'd made himself; Chris Gunstone, a bouzouki player who Bill had met at the Balkan Dance evening class in Clerkenwell; he was an expert on Balkan dance, especially Macedonian; and Sam Palmer who was also living in Fieldgate Mansions and making and playing hurdy-gurdies; he turned out to have some records of traditional music from central France and his mother, Suzanne, and he, wrote a definitive book

about the hurdy-gurdy.

As far as I recall, our first efforts included Bill, Juan, Chris and me, and Juan taught us tunes like Horses Branle, Branle de Bourgogne and Hungaresca, and I can't be sure but I think the first Blowzabella gig was with that line-up. It might have been for Cliff Stapleton's anarchic theatre group the Mountebank Zanies or for a south London student union bash. A clear memory is of the four of us in my car with Juan and Chris in the back giggling over possible names for the band. Both of them delighted in word play, and two of the many suggestions come to mind, The Flying Chaucers and Pita Bread and the Spam Kebabs..... Notes on music and dance arrangements in Bill's immaculate copperplate handwriting in an old notebook of mine show we also played Knife Edge (Bill's name for a tune from a record of the Belgian band Zûnan Planquêts), Rakes of Mallow, Blowzabella, General Toast, Happy Clown, Monk's March. We also had the French and Flemish tunes we'd learnt in Belgium. Later that year, Dave joined us on melodeon and percussion and Sam Palmer on hurdy-gurdy. Dave brought English tunes and Sam loads more French ones, which greatly expanded our repertoire.

At that time we had very little contact with the normal folk circuit; a lot of our playing was for re-enactment events and the summer fairs which were a feature of those years – Hood Fair in Devon, and the Albion Fairs and Rougham Tree Fair in East Anglia. These were a wonderful and magical mixture of street and fringe theatre and unusual music groups. Bill's idea of getting us onto stilts came into its own at these events, because you had a ready-made and mobile stage. I can remember getting the timber (sold for lorry decking) from one of the many east-end woodyards, and knocking them up in the woodwind workshop. That year we made our first trip to Saint Chartier in my old VW bus. I think Sam had told us about it because as a maker, he had a stall there showing his hurdy-gurdies. It seemed like a paradise of good food and wine, beautiful surroundings, masses of new music, dancing till all hours, and best of all, bagpipes and hurdy-gurdies were taken for granted. We also took part in a wonderful manifestation, an explosion of music and theatre called the Festival of Fools. That exceptional theatre group Footsbarn (who are still in existence and have their home near Montlucon in central France) had a lot to do with organising it, I think, and while it usually took place in Europe, that year it toured three venues in the south-west of England, Penzance, Exeter and Woolacombe on the Devon coast; an unforgettable experience. In August Bill sadly had to return to Australia, an interesting consequence of which was that I made my first set of pipes. Bill's pipes were in G/C and he'd bought a melodeon in that key for Dave to play - I vividly remember being struck by the richness of the sound, the first time we tried playing two pipes and melodeon together. When he left for home he took his melodeon with him, which meant that Dave only had his own instrument in D/G so I set about making some pipes in the same key. By the end of 1979 I had a prototype going, and for my final year exhibition in June 1980 I'd completed the first set of Flemish pipes in D, based on the pipes in Pieter Breughel's picture Peasant Dance.

A parallel development in Blowzabella at this time was the interest in Balkan, and especially Macedonian, music. It was Chris who encouraged us in this. He got hold of a Macedonian gaida for me, and we made a tapan (Balkan bass drum). When Bill left, he gave me a pair of Macedonian kavals. We practiced up a repertoire of dance tunes, with Chris on bouzouki, Dave Roberts on tambura, Dave Armitage on tapan, and myself playing gaida and kaval. Chris was in touch with a Balkan enthusiast called Philip Thornton, a somewhat eccentric man who claimed to have travelled with Bela Bartok collecting folk tunes; whether this was so or not, he certainly did have possession of a wonderful collection of women's traditional costume from Macedonia which he said he had brought back in the 50's. These he was willing to lend to us, and Chris persuaded various dancers we met to form a performing dance group. As a dance and music group we were called Izvoren, a name punningly thought up by Chris. In Serbo-Croat it apparently means *source* or *spring*,

whereas Chris would say “Is foreign, geddit?” We gave quite a few performances with full costumes, including Saint Chartier in 1981. Philip Thornton was supposed also to be with us, but I think he distrusted the French water too much and made his excuses.

When Paul and Cliff (with his G gurdy) joined the band, one result was that the predominant keys once more became G and C, and my thoughts turned to designing an early English bagpipe in G/C. A year or two before I'd bought at auction at Sotheby's an old zampogna which was pitched around A flat. I had the idea of using the high chanter of this as the basis of a chanter in G, since no actual early English bagpipe is known to survive, whereas the zampogna looks as though it has scarcely changed since the 16th century. I evolved a two drone bagpipe based on this and both Paul and I played one in the band for several years. The Flemish pipes were not discarded however, and began to be used more again when the hurdy-gurdy players got instruments in D. I have forgotten what year it was when I first heard an old boxwood Grande Cornemuse being played at St Chartier by (I think) Mic Baudiment, but the sound made an unforgettable impression, and whereas in the very early years it seemed that the prevailing pitch was the Berry pitch of G/C, once the 80's got under way, musicians became more interested in the G/D pitch of the Bourbonnais instruments. The recording Les Ecoliers de St Geneste was a milestone in this respect. I remember Cliff coming back from France with some new Bourbonnais style tunes he had learnt. On the bagpipe front, for several years I had been thinking about and tinkering with the development of a bagpipe more suited to modern British and European repertoire. In 1985 I finally achieved a version of the border pipes in G, which really has been the foundation of my business since, though I have developed it into several other keys. I made a set for Paul in 1986, and it became our standard bagpipe. It enlarged the bagpipe possibilities for the band, and was another step in enriching the band's performance. The same year, I had the honour of being elected Honorary President of the newly formed Bagpipe Society.

The work which I saw and heard at Saint Chartier from makers such as Bernard Blanc and Remy Dubois showed me what could be achieved in quality of workmanship, and beauty of sound and appearance, and had a big influence on my pipe-making. We were also much influenced in our playing by the musicians we heard there; one could mention any number, but I am thinking particularly of people like Jean Blanchard, Eric Montbel, Frederic Paris, and Bernard and Jean-Claude Blanc. Because we were responsible to a large degree for introducing French music into English dance circles, there was the impression that we mainly played French music. This was never actually the case, and on the contrary I think we were well aware of the need to respect our own traditions, and as far as piping was concerned, I was conscious of the need to develop a style appropriate to English music. I should also mention the influence of Saint Chartier on the band from the point of view of the dance experience. It was a real eye-opener in the first year or two to see people dancing *without instructions from a caller*, and to see the importance of couple dances. The callers in the band took this to heart, and I think we resolved thenceforth both to introduce couple dances (which were just as common in the English folk tradition) and to attempt to minimize the impact of “calling” at dances. During the early 80's, Paul's organisational skills came very much to the fore, and it was he who was largely responsible for our first recording in 1982, and for consolidating the progress of the band thereafter. We were the two woodwind players in the group and it was a partnership which was immensely exhilarating, and (since we came from completely different musical backgrounds) one from which I learnt a great deal. I find it very satisfying that in the latest incarnation of the band this musical relationship still continues. Playing in a good dance band to a large audience is an unbeatable experience, and there were lots of great experiences in those years. So when in 1987 I took the decision to leave for reasons of family commitments, it was a terrific wrench. However in 1989 I was free to return. I'd kept in touch with the repertoire, and in the

summer of that year (the 200th anniversary of the French revolution) we played for a dance at Saint Chartier under the Tour Anglais of the chateau, the first time a band had been formally booked to play for dancing at the festival. So that was my first gig on rejoining, and to say that it was a blast would be to put it mildly. Having been out of the band during its busiest period, I'd not been subject to the stresses and strains of major touring, so it was a big disappointment to me when towards the end of 1990 the band split up.

On the other hand I had the freedom to develop projects of my own, which otherwise might not have got off the ground. In the early 90's I started the bagpipe harmony trio Moebius, with Judy Rockliff and Don Ward for which I write and arrange all the music. In 1993 we made the CD 'August' and we still perform occasionally (David Faulkner took over from Judy). I've published the music, and given workshops on bagpipe harmony playing both here and in Europe and America, and it's gratifying that the music has been taken up by several bagpipe groups in Europe. In 1997 I took this somewhat further, writing an extended piece for six pipes and percussion called The Halfe-Hannikin Variations. This became the group Zephyrus, with Chris Walshaw and David Faulkner on low C pipes, Judy Rockliff, Anne Marie Summers and Lawrence Morgan-Anstee on G pipes, myself on high C pipes and Terry Mann on percussion. Other musical projects in recent years include Paul James' short-lived creation, the Hittites, a duo with accordionist Becky Price, an occasional band called Beckham with Becky and violinists Jane Lawrence and Jane Harbour, and a Glastonbury area Salsa band called Caribé.

The 25th anniversary celebrations, suggested by Paul, were a lot of work and not undertaken without some misgivings, but turned out to be immensely satisfying and fantastically exciting. To have all the available ex-members on stage together, including Bill O'Toole, Dave Armitage, Sam Palmer and Cliff Stapleton at Bath on November 29th, for it all to have worked and come together just right, was an unforgettable experience. As for the performance on July 14th on the mainstage at Saint Chartier, it went as well as it could possibly have gone; it was an incredible feeling and a crowning glory, and I'm very proud of it. When Blowzabella was formed I was at a turning point in my life; to have met all the people mentioned here, all the other friends met along the way, the members of the band past and present, seems to me an extraordinary piece of good fortune, and one for which I shall always be grateful.