

A chat with Hey Marseilles' Matt Bishop: Blame it on the rain

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It's always been a *bit* of a stretch to embrace the immortal (?) Bobby Sherman's assertion that "The bluest skies you've ever seen (are) in Seattle." Shoot, we might as well call him Robert Ripley. Guitar hero Mark Knopfler was a little more believable with these words from his ode to the Emerald City: "Seattle - you've got to love the rain."

But whether it's rainin' or shinin', there's *one* thing about the home of the Space Needle that everyone can agree on – it's the center of the music universe. **Heart**, **Pearl Jam**, **Fleet Foxes**, **Foo Fighters** – the list of incredible bands is *endless*. And with the release of their critically acclaimed second studio album "Lines We Trace," [Hey Marseilles](#) proves once again that *they* belong on that endless list.

[Hey Marseilles](#) first won hearts across the U.S. with its 2010 debut, "To Travels & Trunks." With **Matt Bishop's** lyrical wayfaring abutting an instrumental palette that embraced folk tradition – accordion, strings, and horns; gypsy, Gallic, and classical – the band's initial effort gave musical voice to the universal longing for unfettered freedom.

With 12 outstanding cuts on the new album, Bishop (lead vocals, guitar), **Nick Ward** (guitar, mandolin), **Philip Kobernik** (accordion, piano), **Samuel Anderson** (cello), **Jacob Anderson** (viola), and **Colin Richey** (drums) establish themselves as a band steady enough in its sound – poignant, panoramic, unreservedly gorgeous – that it can expand *beyond* it.

The string section that hums throughout “Elegy” – in the band’s quintessentially sweeping style – shifts into finely composed abstraction for the song’s final minute. The skittering rhythm on “Bright Stars Burning” is a gentle breakbeat, a sly nod to atmospheric drum ‘n’ bass. And “Madrona” and the album-closing “Demian” are Hey Marseilles’ first fully instrumental songs, a pair of echo-laden piano-and-cello dirges that are simultaneously solemn and sumptuous.

In between gigs, Bishop was kind enough to chat with me about the album’s firsts and the plusses of firing up the band in the galaxy’s undisputed musical hotbed. Bishop had a remarkably straightforward theory as to what makes Seattle so musically fertile.

“You know, I think there’s just something about being in a place where you don’t necessarily want to go outside a lot of the year that also has pretty inspiring scenery. We’re not in such a dense city that people live in apartments, there’s a lot of people living in houses. So it’s very easy to put in a drum set and create a band.”

“And there’s a lot of good clubs and the community over the last 20 to 30 years has certainly been very strong. So there’s just a lot of positive, and a lot of reasons that folks would necessarily get into music and a lot of reasons to support music.”

Contrary to what you might expect, a music career wasn’t always in the cards for the talented band members. Bishop and Ward founded the band almost as an afterthought, meeting as fellow students at the University of Washington and subsequently deciding to give it a musical go along with Kobernik.

“We were definitely pretty accidental. The time that Nick and I and Phillip formed Hey Marseilles, I had a pretty solid day job and still did until recently. Our first record took us about two years to finish writing and putting together the songs before we released it. And then it’s been another, almost four, five years since we released that one locally.”

“So had we been more intentional or knew what we were doing – or thought that it would have any success – we would have probably been on our third or fourth record by this time. I think it worked out really well for us that way.”

Listening to the extraordinary textures of the band’s records, it’s almost beyond comprehension that Hey Marseilles’ music might have never seen the light of day. Bishop wasn’t surprised at their ability to mesh.

“Collectively we have enough experience or skills to pull that kind of texture off. Our string players have been playing cello and viola since they were pretty much toddlers, even though when they joined the band, I think they were 16 and 19, respectively.”

“It was definitely *not* the type of music that they were necessarily listening to. But maybe the type of music that their *parents* were listening to, whether it’s classical or folk from the ‘60s or ‘70s.”

“We weren’t necessarily intentional about what type of genre we wanted to fit into. And that’s kind of reflected in the first record. It’s all over the place in terms of pretty, rich instrumental pieces as well as singer-songwriter songs.”

“Both of those types are in ‘(To) Travels & Trunks’ and that’s just reflective of the diversity of our musical appreciation as a band, but also our willingness to really respect each other and want to make great music for everybody.”

“Lines We Trace” is a wonderfully otherworldly feast of Hey Marseilles’ diverse sound, not to mention an astonishing cross section of their “recording studios.” The band recorded the cuts at such unexpected locations as a tunnel, a park and a church sanctuary, among others. Bishop confessed that the idea to steer away from traditional recording studios was *not* accidental.

“A lot of our instrumentation is pretty acoustic. We were actually touring a couple of years ago in support of the national release of ‘To Travels & Trunks,’ which ended up becoming a video. The idea was that each instrument would be recorded separately in a different location.”

“We ended up discovering that the cello and viola and some of the guitar works – we recorded it in a post office or we recorded it in a giant warehouse – ended up sounding really good just for that video.”

“When we were thinking about this record, we really wanted to try to tap into the natural acoustic benefits of some of those types of spaces. So we just posted on FaceBook and did some research in Seattle to see what kind of spaces were out there. And we found a pretty wide variety.”

Not *every* music lover will appreciate – or *care* about – the delightful subtleties of making a record in a tunnel. But even listeners that *aren’t* interested in the “underground” intricacies of Hey Marseilles’ sound will find something astonishing.

“Folks who are really into the instrumental nuance and how they’re recorded and whether they’re on tape or the computer – there’s a certain contingent of our fan base that really appreciate us for that.”

“There’s also a certain contingent of our fan base that doesn’t necessarily know anything about that and doesn’t care about it and really likes the lyrics. That’s something we’ve come to learn. They’re all equally valuable in our eyes and that only makes us stronger in terms of our potential appeal.”

It’s obvious that diversity permeates the band’s professional existence, whether one’s talking about their music, their instrumentation or their fan base. It even extends to the *band* members, having begun as an acoustic duo and subsequently expanded to the current sextet. Dealing with the expanding ensemble hasn’t been without its challenges.

“It *can* be challenging,” agreed Bishop. “Just having additional or more than the usual number of band members is logistically challenging for all sorts of reasons. Part of what’s taken us some time to release a second record, is figuring out how to navigate each other’s egos and how to write collaboratively.”

“And ‘Lines We Trace’ is really a reflection of the amount of time it took for us to learn how to write songs and understand what each person brings to the table. So to me the new record is a pretty significant accomplishment.”

A wise man once suggested that the “secret to happiness is that wherever you’re at, be there.” And that in a nutshell seems to be the insightful theme of “Lines We Trace,” an observation that Bishop agreed with completely.

“Absolutely. That’s probably the most succinct way I’ve heard it put in terms of the interviews I’ve done. I’m gonna start using that line (laughing). That’s pretty much it, yeah.”

The talented Bishop needs *no* help coming up with lines as he handles the bands’ song lyrics. He laughed in agreement when I suggested that he plays **Bernie Taupin** to his band mates’ **Elton Johns**.

“What I bring to the table essentially is the lyrics,” professed Bishop. “And it’s really the only way that I know how to tell a story. The instrumentals I have less of a hand in. In fact, ‘Medrona’ was recorded with really only Phillip and Sam. So I hadn’t even heard it until it had been recorded and composed for the record.”

Songwriters get their inspiration from many different places, some of it from their *own* lives and some of it as an interested observer telling someone *else’s* story. Bishop confessed to being somewhere in between.

”I’ve been trying to be more intentional with this record about telling a story with each song. The first record, I didn’t feel like I was necessarily doing that every time. That was definitely a goal. I felt better about maybe having accomplished that.”

“And certainly the inspiration that I draw comes from my own experience, not necessarily being a protagonist in each of those stories, but certainly from people I interact with and the context in which I find myself.”

In an industry dominated by glitz and glam – not to mention with something less than enduring music – a band like Hey Marseilles can get lost in the shuffle. But rather than focusing on the downsides of the changing music industry, Bishop and the band view it as an opportunity.

“Yeah, definitely. For any band that’s in our position, there’s more opportunity on the front end in terms of being able to get into the sights of people who are interested in unique or independent music.”

“The challenge is on the *back* end, trying to facilitate it and trying to progress. Because there’s not much money to be made in music anymore and there’s some decisions you have to make if you only want to be able to make money from touring – decisions about what you want to do with your life.”

“We’re all relatively young still and we don’t have to make decisions about family and settling down and all those things. But within the next few years, I suspect that it will be a lot more relevant. And touring eight months out of the year probably isn’t something that’s gonna be feasible.”

All of which means that we’d better enjoy Hey Marseilles’ melodic brilliance while we can, particularly in light of Bishop’s well-balanced perspective.

“It’s hard to understand what the long haul is anymore in music. There’s not much of an industry to count on. But, you know, we’re taking it record to record. For sure we’ll at least be making one other album. If ‘Lines We Trace’ is well received, or even if it isn’t, I think we’ll go back in the studio.”

“But if the next one isn’t either, than there will probably be some serious discussion at that point. We’ll be around for a couple of years at least. These days, that’s a decent amount of time to commit to a job.”

That may be. But if Hey Marseilles’ loyal fans have anything to say about it, Matt Bishop and the boys will be releasing alums when they’re old and gray...

There are a few dates left on the band’s current tour:

- July 16 - Vancouver, BC – Biltmore Cabaret
- July 18 - Portland, OR - Wonder Ballroom
- July 20 - Los Angeles, CA - El Rey
- July 21 - Solana Beach, CA - Belly Up Tavern
- July 26 – Newport, RI – Newport Folk Festival
- July 28 – Seattle, WA – Capitol Hill Block Party
- July 31 – Toronto, ONT – Edgefest 2013 – Downsview Park
- Aug. 2-4 – Chicago, IL – Lollapalooza