

# Interview

MUSIC

## *HEY MARSEILLES KNOWS ITS LINES*

By LEA WEATHERBY



**March 27<sup>th</sup> 2013**

Orchestral-pop ensemble Hey Marseilles seamlessly integrate folk and classical melody by way of cello, piano, guitar, accordion, trumpet, viola, and drums. Though some of its members have been classically trained, others have not, and their varying musical backgrounds combine to form a sound that is refreshing and highly nuanced. Lead vocalist Matt Bishop delivers their music with effortless tonality; lyrics seem to float over the sound of instruments, resulting in an aching, lingering tenderness.

Since Bishop formed the band with his friend Nick Ward in 2006, Hey Marseilles has released two albums, *To Travels & Trunks* and *Lines We Trace*, each of which showcases their unique brand of "folkestra." We caught up with Bishop in advance of Hey Marseilles' show tonight at Mercury Lounge.

LEA WEATHERBY: So, you guys got together back in 2006, right?

MATT BISHOP: Yeah that's when we started playing music together. I don't know if we were skilled enough to qualify as a band. [laughs] But yeah.

WEATHERBY: Did you have an idea from the start of the kind of instruments you wanted to incorporate and the kind of musicians you wanted to work with?

BISHOP: It wasn't particularly intentional, we were all working on song demos in the basement studio of the house that they lived in, and with the songs that we were playing, it felt like we really wanted some additional instrumentation and we brought in Jacob [on the viola] and Sam Anderson, who plays cello. And we started as that five-piece, and then we had a drummer, so we didn't set out with any specific focus or genre in mind; we were just mostly trying to make music that was compelling to us.

WEATHERBY: Were you all friends before realizing you also had a common bond with music?

BISHOP: It was really organic. We just met as people who really enjoyed music, and that's how our relationship started, and we just pushed each other to make sure that our skill level as musicians was maintained and always where it needed to be.

WEATHERBY: You're lucky to have so many friends that also happen to be very talented.

BISHOP: [laughs] It did work out.

WEATHERBY: You go to unusual places to record sometimes—places that inspire good melody or sound. What are some of the places you've recorded to achieve that?

BISHOP: Yeah, we do that. Because we have a fair amount of acoustic instrumentation, one of the things we did with the recording process was find acoustically beneficial spaces that highlighted the strength and talent behind some of our instruments. We did this a lot around Seattle, in old warehouses and Golden Garden Park tunnel.

WEATHERBY: With the amount of instruments being played and the amount of bandmates that you have, are there creative conflicts where you guys have to really put an effort into finding a common ground when writing a song?

BISHOP: It's definitely taken some time to figure out how to write songs together. We spend a lot of our time and energy on the instrumental arrangements of a song and the underlying chord progression and really the structure of it. So with as many people as we have invested in that process, it can take time. We certainly have figured out the best ways to come to conclusions during the songwriting process, but we all have an investment and a voice in how songs turn out, so there isn't any one voice dictating that.

WEATHERBY: You've been described as indie folk, but your creative efforts seem to go beyond just that. What kind of music inspires you the most?

BISHOP: We probably all have very different answers to that question. First of all, I perceive music and the songwriting process through the lens of a singer-songwriter's perspective.

I write most of the lyrics for the band, and I really have an interest in language and how that interacts with melody and underlying chord structures and instrumentation. So, folks like James Mercer or Isaac Brock, those are artists I really try to look to for inspiration. But some of us are classically trained and some of us aren't, so we all come from different places in terms of what music we're listening to and what we consume as listeners as well.

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WEATHERBY: What would you like to preserve, moving forward, as a band? What would you always like your music to represent or communicate?

BISHOP: Wow. That is an excellent question. I think Hey Marseilles is really a product of our personalities as individuals and our collective interests in challenging ourselves and our listeners to look for new and interesting things, in terms of what we're writing or what we're hearing as we write music. That is something, hopefully, we will continue to do no matter what is ahead of us. I don't see us deciding to write a record with three-minute songs, all of which are going to be radio hits. So, however that translates in the future—I'm not sure, just so long as we're challenging people.

WEATHERBY: You've said that "finding and creating home where you're at" is a focus for the new album. Is there any track in particular that speaks most to that notion?

BISHOP: It's not really explicit in any particular song, but "Elegy" is an example of that. It's so tempting to kind of detach from where you're at and find what you think will be satisfying somewhere else. There's a line about "keep your feet on the concrete ground"—the idea is that wherever you are, you can find stability, you can find your sense of self. In the context of how that song plays out, I definitely think it's a theme. And even in some of the more explicitly love songs, there's also the idea that something may have ended but that doesn't mean one can't find something of value in the experience. And even if it might seem like a really sad song, in reality it's more of an expression of acceptance.

WEATHERBY: In the past month or so, since *Lines We Trace* was released, what do you feel you've accomplished as a band?

BISHOP: We're lined up for a couple of summer festivals, like Newport Folk Festival (in Rhode Island) and Firefly (in Delaware), and we're really excited about those things. This is also our first national, headlining tour, and we're able to play cities we've never played before. Like Nashville—we played to a room of almost 200 people, and it was the first time we've ever stepped foot in that town, so we're having a lot of those kind of experiences that we're proud of and really humbled by.