

## **The rise of Welsh rock and pop**

*by David Owens 2006*



**Welsh pop music doesn't have the most auspicious history. But for the last decade the country has been creating one of the most innovative, diverse and dynamic scenes in the British Isles**

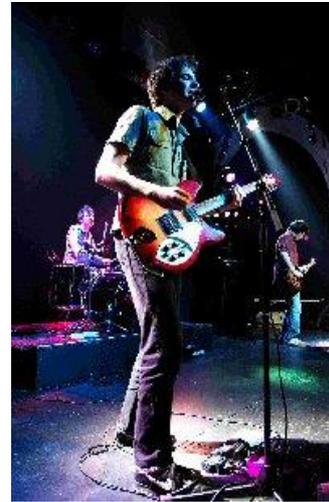
Bonnie Tyler, Shakin' Stevens, Shirley Bassey, Tom Jones, Michael Ball, Aled Jones – they all took one hell of a beating. And, let's face it, most of it was warranted. Until the mid-90s, when Wales conjured up such household names as Manic Street Preachers, Stereophonics, Super Furry Animals, Catatonia and Gorky's Zygotic Mynci, the country's music scene was burdened by the weight of its own under-achievement. At the same time the decline of the once mighty coal industry compounded the angst, dealing a hammer blow to the country's confidence that took a long time to recover from. Success, both economically and culturally, though, has been quietly and steadily growing and a nation once on its knees now walks tall. The formation of the Welsh Assembly has given the country some autonomy to carve out its own political destiny, while the regeneration of its capital city, Cardiff, with its new Millennium Stadium, is a shining monument to Wales' reawakening.

And this rebirth, which comes from a sense of pride in identity, has much to do with Wales' startling musical transformation. To trace the cultural uprising that has spawned so much groundbreaking music, you have to tread backwards to the dim and distant past, and immerse yourself in the murky embarrassment of Wales' dark ages.

There was a time when you could bet anyone asked about Welsh music would have cited newly-knighted Sir Tom Jones, big-spending Shirley Bassey, and male voice choirs amongst the nation's achievements – cliché's that would trip off the tongue as predictably as others associated with Wales (the land of sheep, leeks, daffodils, druids, dragons and bilingual road signs). Read this sparse roll-call of Welsh success and hear the wind whistle across the barren rock 'n roll conquering plain: the 60s and 70s served up Cardiff's original Britpop stars Amen Corner, the downbeat Beatles-aping Badfinger, pastoral folky Mary Hopkin, rock 'n roll survivor Dave Edmunds, psychedelic soundscapers Man, and heavy rockers Budgie. Meanwhile the 80s gave birth to Rhyl rabble rousers The

Alarm, Swansea's archly-knowing indie cult The Pooh Sticks, Cardiff's coolly influential Young Marble Giants and Newport's blonde popsters The Darling Buds. And that was the sum credibility quotient of 30 years of hurt.

But it was a decade ago in 1996 – year zero for the new Welsh music big bang – when all that changed forever. A new breed of bands blossomed and forced talent-spotting A&R men who had never dared to cross the Severn Bridge, to check out what all the fuss was about. Bands featuring Welsh-speaking musicians such as Catatonia, Super Furry Animals and Gorky's Zygotic Mynci were not overnight sensations. They had learnt their craft and honed their talent playing for years as part of a burgeoning Welsh language scene that had prospered in the late 80s and early 90s. By 1996, with experience under their belts, they were ready for the limelight.



Wales is unique in that it is one of very few countries that harbours two equally strong music scenes – one in English, one in Welsh. These two disparate and diverse breeding grounds make occasionally uncomfortable bedfellows but in the main exist in a state of unencumbered creativity. Legendary Welsh language bands such as Y Cyrff and The Crumblowers (who formed the nucleus of Catatonia) and Ffa Coffi Pawb (who featured Super Furry Animals' frontman Gruff Rhys) realised if they were ever to make a successful career they would have to sing in English – a politically contentious decision facing Welsh-speaking bands even to this day. The simple fact was that Welsh-speaking bands might make it big in Wales, but their music was unlikely to export far beyond the border.

Meanwhile, the music press was having a field day with the emergent scene, conjuring such predictable headlines as "Fight the Powys that Be", "You Make Me Feel Mighty Rhy!", and the criminal "Don't Leek Back In Anger". Alongside Britpop, which was firing a British music renaissance and making heroes of Blur, Pulp and Oasis, Welsh music was in vogue for the first time and everybody wanted a piece of the action. "Cool Cymru" was the unfortunate monicker attached to the scene, but at least this wasn't some media-manufactured hype. Owen Powell, former guitarist with Catatonia, who now heads up his own Cardiff-based management company and looks after hotly-tipped newcomers The Poppies, pinpoints the differences between the scene now and its embryonic stages 10 years ago. 'The bi-product of this decade of change has been the creation of a stand-alone, self-sufficient music industry that has prospered through the lessons learnt from the past and a more professional outlook applied to the present. Where there were very few record companies, recording studios, rehearsal rooms, management companies, or the merest hints of an industry framework, now there is a defined business structure.'



This is the legacy of a musical movement that is as healthy and vibrant as any in the UK and, as Owen says, the aftershocks of Cool Cymru are still being felt: 'The bands that were successful back then had two effects. Firstly, they made a generation of people want to join bands, and secondly, the others who didn't want to or couldn't join a band, put on gigs, formed labels or got involved in any way they could.'

Radio 1 and Radio Wales DJ Bethan Elfyn was one of those inspired by the mid-90s scene to get involved with music through going to gigs by both English- and Welsh-speaking bands. 'Unfortunately it's been difficult for the media to move on from those names and bands [of the mid-90s], but Welsh music hasn't stopped developing, evolving or producing big names. At a time when indie music is more popular than ever before, the proliferation of Welsh fanzines, magazines, websites, venues and new festivals means there's more opportunities than ever before and, most importantly, more genres of music.'

That's the key: Wales has never been about one style of music or one particular scene. It is a particularly parochial area. 'Wales is like four or five different countries in one,' says Owen Powell. 'Wherever you go you get various sounds and styles – rock and metal in the South Wales valleys, pastoral, psychedelic folk in West Wales. You have the Welsh language stronghold of Gwynedd (North West Wales) and everything from dance, hip hop and experimental electronica in between.' You only have to look at two of Wales' most successful recent acts to underline this diverse approach. From the dark heart of the Rhondda Valley come soon-to-be-stadium-sized rock giants Lostprophets, heading a fertile metal scene that has already produced Funeral For A Friend and Bullet For My Valentine. While from the council estate chaos of Newport's mean streets come the slightly less intense, shell-suited, cartoon chav rappers, Goldie Lookin' Chain.

Hotly-tipped to follow these success stories are The Automatic and The Heights – two Welsh bands from opposite backgrounds. Young whizz-kids The Automatic are electro-pop punk scamps from the English-speaking town of Cowbridge. They've signed to B-Unique, the same label as Kaiser Chiefs and The Ordinary Boys. Championed by NME, they look set to emulate their labelmates' success. Meanwhile, one-time Welsh language outfit Gogz now sing in English as The Heights. These North Walian peddle a fine line in thrilling, visceral rock 'n roll. They're also the first band signed to music venue chain Barfly's new record label Best Before Records.

And there's an eclectic array of rising stars waiting in the wings for their main chance, from the expansive mind rap of Akira The Don and blissed-out folktronica pioneer Jakokoyak, to the decadent pop of The Hot Puppies and wired guitar rock of The Poppies. Ashli Todd of Spillers Records, Cardiff's self-proclaimed "world's oldest record shop", says all these emerging bands are indicative of today's industrious scene: 'It's vibrant and buzzing with hotly tipped new acts. Welsh language bands are still thriving within their niche market. Live music is booming and there are some top-notch releases being distributed by major labels, local labels and in a DIY stylee.'



Back in the mid-90s, Ashli confesses the popularity of the Manics, Furries, Phonics, Catatonia and the rest of the Cool Cymru crowd, saved the shop from extinction. But she sounds a note of caution to those expecting another epochal musical uprising: 'It doesn't look like we're going to have another Cool Cymru. This is probably because Welsh bands don't really need to prove themselves to an international audience. Those bands in the last wave of Cool Cymru paved the way for those making music now. This time there's no need for a catchy tag line. It was great for the scene at the time and now it's not unusual to see Welsh acts in the music press and on radio and national TV – which is how it always should be.'

### **David Owens 2006**

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David Owen is a journalist working for icWales – the national website for Wales. He is also the author of *Cerys*, *Catatonia* and *The Rise of Welsh Pop* (Ebury Press).

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### **DIGGING THE NEW WELSH BREED**

The ones from Wales to watch

#### **Akira the Don**

If Jesus had blonde hair, came from Wales and decided to embark on a career as a rapper then he would be Akira The Don, or at least look like him.

w: [www.akirathedon.co.uk](http://www.akirathedon.co.uk)

**Attack and Defend**

Inventive performers of music in a country-tingled electro indie disco mould, making songs about mass consumption, wind turbines and gypsies.

w: [www.attackanddefend.co.uk](http://www.attackanddefend.co.uk)

**The Automatic**

Supercharged electro punk popsters whose live shows are as breathless as their energetic and frenetic songs.

w: [www.theautomatic.co.uk](http://www.theautomatic.co.uk)

**The Heights**

Raw, ragged, rock 'n roll from North Wales' answer to Kings of Leon.

w: [www.theheightsmusic.com](http://www.theheightsmusic.com)

**The Hot Puppies**

The Pups mix three-minute spiky guitar/synth pop, loaded with razor sharp hooks and barbed lyrics, balancing in equal measures bittersweet sugar and spite.

w: [www.thehotpuppies.com](http://www.thehotpuppies.com)

**MC Mabon**

Welsh language's mad scientist and bonkers experimentalist Gruff Meredith throws rock, rap and hip hop into the mix.

w: [www.mcmabon.co.uk](http://www.mcmabon.co.uk)

**The Poppies**

Coursing with big-hearted energy,