

Wayward and free

Nathaniel Handy speaks to English singer-songwriter Eliza Carthy, who is the happiest she's ever been with her new band, new voice and newfound freedom



Steve Gullick

Eliza Carthy is back. The first daughter of folk is on a mission to make some noise. In full voice and with 11 able band mates, you're gonna hear her coming... "I have a completely new voice. It's like a new instrument. For a good ten years, I forgot what it was like to make music for pleasure. I lost all joy in it. That's what the Wayward Band is for me: pure, fucking joy!"

There is a time in life, in the words of the American writer Garrison Keillor, when one should '*whoop it up, hail a pal, split a gut, cut a rug, have a ball, or make a joyful noise.*' For Eliza Carthy – singer, songwriter, fiddler and daughter of English folk grandees Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson – that time is now.

The past few years have been tough ones. In the arc of her life, Carthy has recently had to battle a bewildering array of trauma – her mother's illness, the break-up of a relationship, and perhaps most symbolically, the loss of her voice and subsequent operation to remove a cyst from close to her vocal cords. It's enough to make anyone take stock of where they've reached and where they might be heading.

These events coincided with Carthy's 21st anniversary as a recording artist. The milestone was celebrated with a biography by Sophie Parkes – 2012's *Wayward Daughter* – and the *Best Of* retrospective of the same name. "If you read the biography it ends quite darkly," reflects Carthy. "It ends at the beginning of all that sadness and I thought, that's not the end of it. I remember I was at Sidmouth [Folk Week] and I thought, what if...?"

A stonking, great English folk big band complete with brass section. Ring any bells? The curtain closed on Bellowhead's final show in May, but back in the early 00s, Carthy remembers how it all began. "I was touring with Jon [Boden] and John [Spiers] in the Ratcatchers when the idea of a big band came up. We all loved La Bottine Souriante, who were themselves

inspired by my dad's band, Brass Monkey. We were all interested in presenting English folk in that way: a bigger band, a bigger sound and a bigger audience."

Carthy's moment came some ten years later. With her at the Sidmouth Folk Week was Jim Moray, another English folk artist who has striven to take his music to a wider audience. "With a band of this size, Jim and I wanted to express the bigger ideas that we'd had on our albums, but which had been stymied by small stages and not being able to afford a big band," Carthy explains. Moray has since left the project to pursue folk rock with his new band False Lights, but Carthy found the financial backing for The Wayward Band, and they are due to release their debut album, *Big Machine*, at the end of January 2017.

The new album will include 11 songs, some of which are only a minute long. Carthy appreciates the power of brevity: "I'm not a fan of records that are more than about 50 minutes long." Two self-penned tracks include 'Great Grey Back' and a substantial reworking of the politically-charged 2015 single 'You Know Me', with beat poet Disraeli bringing spoken word to the mix. "When I first wrote that song, I don't think anyone realised quite how dark and upsetting the refugee crisis was going to get," explains Carthy. The echoing line – '*not in my name*' – reverberates through this single, harking as it does to the wider anger over political disempowerment and the need for more love and less fear. Where the 2015 single was accompanied by a bucolic video of the band frolicking in orchards, the new version features a dark, bar-room video reflecting the darker hue it has taken on. This is perhaps indicative of the darkening mood of the country in general. It was produced in the build-up to the EU referendum that sank into a fear campaign about them (migrants, Europeans, foreigners?) and us (Brits, English, white Anglo-Saxons?). ▶



Mike Flinscoe

Eliza Carthy performing at Homegrown Festival in 2015



Steve Gullick

The other non-traditional track is Rory McLeod's 'Hug You Like a Mountain', a duet with Teddy Thompson. The final guest appearance comes from Irish singer Damien Dempsey, who joined Carthy and the band at Real World Studios to record a full, orchestral version of the traditional 'I Wish That the Wars Were All Over'. The rest of the album features traditional material, mostly drawn from the Chetham's Library collection in Manchester. "I did that programme for [BBC] Radio 4 last year about the Chetham's Library – *The Manchester Ballads*," says Carthy. "The wonderful librarian essentially gave me their digital archives on two discs." That amounted to some 4,500 songs of which four appear on the album. "There's some incredible stuff," says Carthy. "'The Sea' has the most fantastically apocalyptic, cinematic lyrics of whales breaching and stormy seas. Much of the material is extremely moot. In the 1800s, you expect traditional music in England to be English, but of course it wasn't. Especially in Manchester and Liverpool, a lot of the popular music was Irish. This isn't the first time that this happened. It's happened over and over and over again in this country. People forget that. These broadside ballads reflect the Irish experience."

But for all the historical content, Carthy is always a musician who is trying to speak to a contemporary audience about tradition within the context in which we now live. "Folk music at its best – like pop music at its best – provides a common thread for people to band together in a community," says Carthy. "If you want to return what used to be very popular to people again, how do you do that? It's not about making an old thing better, it's just about expressing it as a modern person who has listened to the Wombles and Coldplay and Tinie Tempah."

In bringing this new sound to the people, Carthy has some formidable assistance. The Wayward Band is not only taking up the mantle of Bellowhead, it includes an ex-member in fiddler Sam Sweeney. There are also long-time collaborators Saul Rose (melodeon) and Barn Stradling (bass), Mawkin guitarist David Delarre, Lucy Farrell (viola), Beth Porter (cello) and Adrien 'Yen'

Toulouse (trombone). There's even space for both drums (Willy Molleson) and percussion (Laurence Hunt).

"With the Wayward Band, I can now fully express onstage every single aspect of everything that I've ever tried," says Carthy. "It's a massive freedom for me. I've always done my own string arranging and now I can have it played by the Wayward Band string section. The percussionist can programme drums for my electronic elements. I've got electric bass and I've got the bass trombone. Everyone sings. Andrew Waite, who plays squeezebox and keys, can deliver what Martin Green used to fulfil. It's the first time I've actually been able to use my full palette. We can do the beauty and we can do the grunge. We can do everything. That's why we wanted to make *Big Machine*."

Such breadth in depth has allowed Carthy to revisit many of the most original moments in her back catalogue in their live show. Her big hip-hop track 'Stingo' from her 1998 album *Red Rice*, for which she was nominated for the Mercury Music Prize, has been given the Wayward treatment alongside that album's main tune set 'The Stacking Reel'. "We used to tour with a dancer," she remembers. "We haven't got a clog dancer in this band, so I need to get just one more person..."

Having come through the storm, Carthy seems determined to cut loose. She has assembled a motley band that appears to share her desire to have a blast and take the audience with them. "Everything that we've done for this record has just been joyful, which is odd for a load of miserable sods," throws in Carthy with her trademark rich, devilish laugh – a laugh you'd imagine being emitted by *Captain Pugwash* villain Cut-Throat Jake. "This is the happiest band I have ever played with." She clearly means it. This is a buoyant time, and with her newfound voice – her "new instrument" – Carthy believes we will hear her as never before on *Big Machine*. ♦

- + **DATES** *Eliza Carthy and the Wayward Band* begin their UK tour in November, see *Gig Guide* for details
- + **ALBUM** *Big Machine* will be released on January 27

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