

The Roaring '20s: Time traveling with Birt & Harley



Photo credit: Alexandra Ionescu

Picture yourself walking into a place and being transported to 1920s Paris as you hear two acoustic guitars playing, sweet harmonies traveling through your consciousness, and laughter echoing softly. That is the essence of the new jazz duo, **Birt & Harley**. This twosome, made up of **John Birt** (of the French 75 Dixieland Band and Craic was Mighty) and **Dylan Block-Harley** (of MisSter Dylan and the Horse-Eyed Men), is on a mission to play for anyone, anywhere, bringing timeless music with them and maybe even a puppet or two. I recently chatted with them about how the universe and beloved Providence bar **Nick-a-Nees** conspired to bring them together, how jazz and folk music have merged, and how grateful they are for songs that just keep on giving.

Mayte Antelo-Ovando (Motif): Don't you have two songs about this bar, Dylan?

Dylan Block-Harley: Yeah, at least one song...

John Birt: One was written at the bar.

DB-H: Yeah! John was here actually when “Shit-faced in Space” happened.

MA-O: Really???

JB: It was myself and Ryan Clark. We were hanging out, and we started riffing about getting shit-faced in space...

DB-H: And I was like, give me a napkin!

MA-O: Ha! I was going to ask you how you met, tell me more.

DB-H: We we’re making out at a party one time and I was like, “What’s your name?”

JB: We were both playing in bands around Providence, and [I] was looking for someone to open [our] set. I was in an Irish band called Craic was Mighty. And we wanted someone else to play with us. We were playing [Nick-a-Nees] pretty often, and we were the only ... hip Irish band in Providence. Don’t quote me on that.

DB-H: You can quote ME on that. They were the only...

MA-O: I just wanna pause at “hip Irish band”, haha.

JB: I know right?

DB-H: Busted!

JB: So, we were having some fun and playing Irish music and Dylan was playing in a group with his brother (Noah Block-Harley of the Horse-Eyed Men), they were playing in Tik Tok Laboratories.

DB-H: That’s right.

JB: Tik Tok days... it was beautiful. The first time that I saw him playing he was playing drums, he had a washboard... and all kinds of percussion. And there were puppets involved!

DB-H: Puppets on my shoulders.

JB: We played all over the place together (Nick-a-Nee’s, the Penalty Box), which was a lot of fun. We played the best St. Patrick’s Day ever at the MET! Tik Tok Laboratories and the Seven Star General played. It was wild... It was one of the last shows that the Craic was Mighty did all together because then everybody was kind of moving off. Half the band became farmers, and the other half of the band are still musicians.

DB-H: Haha. As is the way with most hip Irish bands.

JB: I wish I was making this up, but that’s exactly what happened.

MA-O: I wonder if becoming farmers is something in ya’ll’s future at some point.

JB: It might be, maybe we're just delayed in [starting].

DB-H: Fuck no! Quote me on that, fuck no.

JB: [So], Dylan was doing a lot of his solo music. And [it] just blew me away. I loved it... His first solo album, I needed it in my life when it came out. And then after that we were always in touch with each other, jamming on tunes every time I was [back] in town.

DB-H: John's been gone for a while. [He's] super local — born and raised in Pawtucket. But has been gone for the past eight years. So, when he came back, it was like, he's not from here, sort of. He's been gone so long that I became the de facto booking agent, which is crazy, because I'm shit at booking.

JB: I did grad school in Connecticut, stayed [there] for a while and then meandered down to Virginia. I was in Richmond for about two years.

DB-H: He would come back. We'd hang out. We'd drink some beers, make some food. [He'd bring] his Nintendo Switch over. I felt like I was at my friend's house, but I was at my house and my friend brought Zelda. And I'd be like, John, come back, move home.

MA-O: I saw you with the 75 Dixieland Band once, and then I blinked and you got married, were on the road and got a dog.

JB: I had a wild year. I was in Richmond as all the pandemic stuff happened. My partner and I decided, let's convert a van and travel across the country. We did that and then we were on the road for seven months, got a dog in Utah.

DB-H: #vanlife

JB: And then once the vaccinations were out, we [decided] let's go home because now we can actually see our family and friends. And we're kind of settling here. We're in the process of becoming actual Rhode Islanders.

DB-H: That's Rhode Island. Just when you think you're out, it pulls you back in.

MA-O: Yes!

JB: The second I got back into town, the first person I called was Dylan. I was like, "Do you want to hear some jazz tunes I've been playing?"

MA-O: Wait, so is that how this new duo came to be? That phone call?

BOTH: Basically, yeah.

DB-H: We've played music together on and off over the years. And then John said, "Let's do this Gypsy jazz stuff I've been playing a lot." And I love Django Reinhardt. And drums are my heart. So John taught me how to play drums on a guitar, which meant learning a bunch of chords I didn't know. John's an incredible teacher. The joke at first (which is really true), is that all proceeds go directly to my music lessons.

JB: I gave him the crash course on how to play rhythm guitar. And we've been having so much fun with

it. A lot of Dylan's music transfers over to jazz so easily. You know, it's either hardcore folk idioms, which you can still do in a jazzy way, or his tunes are just like, hey- if you add this note to it, it's jazz!

MA-O: Oh wait, wait. For the people that don't know, like myself, what do you add to something that makes it jazz?

DB-H: Oh watch out! Here we fucking go!

JB: Alright, sit down.

MA-O: Just cause I'm curious!

JB: So, the first thing that I was showing him was basically [that] anytime you see a G major chord, where you would normally play you're adding the six and the nine. If you're playing a G chord, you're playing the sixth degree above it, which is the note E. And you're also adding the nine to it, which is the note A. So, it ends up being really nice on the guitar, because you've got six strings, besides playing just the G chord: G, B, and D, you can add an A and an E. And those are unoffensive notes. Those are notes that will spice up your harmony, and make you sound like you know what you're doing. And also, you can do lots of other things over that. Notice there's no sevens in that chord. If you add a seventh to it, it doesn't matter. It could be a minor seventh, it could be a major seventh. I gave him a lot of tricks that [are] failsafe. You really can't go wrong.

DB-H: The only word that I really absorbed from that was the word "spice."

JB: Ha. It's all just different colors that you put on chords. So basically, I made rules. Whenever you play this, you always add that. And he got really good at that. And it's been a deep dive for me, because the past year, I got obsessed with Django Reinhardt stuff, and I've always been obsessed with Louis Armstrong — old school jazz tunes, just the standards, the tunes that you can keep playing every other way and they're so good.

DB-H: I think that's one thing. We've been doing these weekly gigs for [a] couple months ... at least three months. I don't know, time is weird. But the more we play them, the deeper [we] get into them. And I just had an immense gratitude today, like wow, thank you to the people who wrote these songs that have been around forever. These songs are amazing. And they're still relevant.

JB: All of them still speak to you.

DB-H: They're still relevant. Whether it's the music or the music and the words. So yeah, the power of...

JB: ... a really good song just keeps going, you know?

MA-O: Yeah! And now y'all have started playing at Nick-a-Nees and also at the Royal Bobcat.

JB: We kind of looked at Nick-a-Nees as the place to try things out. This is homefield. You come here and you walk in and all the bartenders wink at you and say, "Hey!" I feel like here's where we try out the most random stuff. We're just like, we haven't tried this before-

BOTH: Does this work?

DB-H: [And] I think... our goal is to be able to play anywhere for anyone. So, we're happy being flies on the wall, or part of the wallpaper; and we're happy being the center of attention, you know? We've played a number of different situations, we played a wedding recently. Would love to do more of those, [we're] open to birthday parties, backyard barbecues...

JB: We've played at some rock venues. We are hilarious.

DB-H: And you can quote John on that!

JB: That was too much fun. When we show up and it's a bunch of guys wearing really tight pants, doing their thing, we show up and we're like, this is Louis Armstrong.

DB-H: There's something nice about just being unabashedly like, Imma croon a song for you right now.

JB: It's basically the same thing that they're doing. We're just doing it from different angles.

MA-O: Yeah, that's true. You're all basically playing music to engage an audience, but the style is very different.

DB-H: Yeah, totally. I would say, at Nick-a-Nees we'll banter in-between [songs] and kind of bullshit with the audience. And the Bobcat is much more, we're playing music as part of the evening that's happening.

JB: Yeah, we're kind of setting the scene. The Bobcat [is] a place [where] they've thought really carefully about the type of things they want on the menu, the ambience, the lighting, the type of furniture they have in there. They're kind of recreating a time, and we're playing music from that time. You really can walk through the door, close your eyes for a second and be like, oh it's 1920.

DB-H: Like Jetsons 1920.

JB: Yeah, kind of.

MA-O: When I first heard y'all play I thought, this is totally something that I would hear walking on Frenchmen Street in New Orleans.

JB: Yeah, and we're in the busking business, too. If you want to set us up outside of your shop, [we'll do it].

MA-O: That's good information for people!

JB: We make a scene wherever we're allowed to make a scene.

DB-H: We challenge you to invite us to play somewhere that we won't play. We'll play anywhere. That's what I meant to say: WE WILL PLAY ANYWHERE.

After a bit of back and forth between Dylan and I, where we attempted to teach John some Spanish slang, I asked them how their new band's name, Birt & Harley happened.

DB-H: Noah suggested the name. We were just trying to figure out names and...

JB: We had a lot of fun trying to come up with names. One of them came up recently. I was camping in Maine, and [there's] a place where you [can] dig for clams and I was like, oh we were almost the Clam Diggers! Which is a good name, but not for what we're doing.

DB-H: It's a fun name when you're thinking about names.

MA-O: It's a fun exercise.

JB: The Johnny Cakes.

DB-H: The Potholes.. yeah, I can see you don't like any of these names, Mayté.

JB: We were looking for something that was reminiscent of the time period that we're playing music from. And a lot of those bands [were] usually "so and so and some other stuff", and we have strong names, so it's not a bad thing to put them out there.

DB-H: Birt & Harley also feels applicable across multiple settings for sure.

MA-O: I think that when you say your name, it feels, I don't know, like a legit band.

DB-H: Haha. It gives us room for puppetry too. Scrooge and Marley, Birt and Harley.

MA-O: That's great!

J&D: Just wait for our Christmas show.

DB-H: Everyone is invited...

MA-O: Good to know! What else do you want to share about your band?

JB: It's acoustic music. It really is just two guitars and two guys singing. You can do it unplugged, depending on the venue that we're in. So, it really is kind of an unabashed, this is what we sound like.

DB-H: I would also say that, I think I speak for both of us, I feel very much in it for the long haul with this, and what we're doing right now is phase one of whatever is going to happen. Come hang out while we figure out what the fuck we're doing. It's gonna be fun.

JB: You're gonna hear songs that maybe you [recognize, and] you're gonna hear some old school songs that you've never heard before. I guarantee it.

DB-H: And also, come request songs because John is a whiz at making charts for songs. So, if there's [something] you wanna hear, request it and we'll figure it out.

JB: We also both enjoy the challenge of playing different styles of music. Recently, we were playing at a gig and they [said], "Oh, we really would like some Latin jazz. We want some bossa nova kind of stuff." And we [said]- we can make that happen. So, we learned a whole set and now it's part of our [repertoire]. We can't put that bolero away. We love that bolero.

DB-H: Also, John and I have the same funny bone. Basically you're looking at two Ned Flanders, who grew up on Mystery Men.

JB: We constantly quote the same movie. And I'm like, what does that say about us?

MA-O: Besides the fact that y'all have found each other? I think that's great.

JB: I mean, that explains a lot of things.

DB-H: God led us to each other, Mayté.

MA-O: Yes, haha. The universe put you together, I believe that for sure.

DB-H: It was written.

JB: Besides talking about music, we constantly talk about-in-between songs. What are we gonna [say]? How are we gonna either get the audience on our side, or at least mildly entertain them? We're always thinking about those things because that's part of the show.

MA-O: It sounds like it's sort of off the cuff, but it's not.

DB-H: Yeah, phase one.

JB: But honestly, it's somewhat planned improv, but it never goes the way we thought it was gonna go.

DB-H: I think phase two is gonna be puppets.

MA-O: I can't wait to see that. So, I know you're playing jazz music, but what would you say about traditional music?

DB-H: I'd say a number of the songs we play are "Trad Jazz."

MA-O: Okay, but what's that?

JB: We play jazz standards. Songs that if you walked into a club and mentioned [them] to anybody, they would know the songs.

DB-H: "On The Sunny Side of the Street", "Ain't Misbehavin"- songs that are in the American jazz standard repertoire. There's a couple books- like the Real Book. Right?

JB: Right. Which were collections of the popular tunes that you needed to know, in order to just... play out. We play a lot of those songs. We don't necessarily play the book version of it. If I'm learning a song, I usually just go straight to the recording and basically imitate exactly what they did and then [discern] what fits our voice better? How do we want to intro this?

MA-O: Right, maybe change a key or something?

JB: Yeah, yeah.

DB-H: John is very highly studied in music. I fluked into music because my dad is a musician. And I have a good ear, I grew up around it. I studied drums for a while, but I didn't take a deep dive into it. And John has taken the deepest dive of anybody in my personal circle. So, when I say he can transcribe anything, I mean he can. John also arranged a horn section on a song that I wrote, and we recorded that

down in Charlottesville. He was basically in the room conducting. That's a hard skill. I mean, for me that's a superpower. John's a superhero in my life.

MA-O: I know you play the guitar, bass, all the 5,000 instruments that you and your brother play. But in terms of performance, I see you as a drummer. I like that you said John taught you how to translate drumming into a guitar.

JB: That's what's really cool about the style of music that we play. In Gypsy jazz and early jazz in general, there's no drums. And the reason for that is that they couldn't actually record drums. When you were in a recording studio, there was a needle going on the wax, and if you hit a drum the needle would go flying off. So, when you listen to early Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five, there's no drums involved, it's all horns. You had one instrument plucking away at the rhythm, and that was either a banjo or a guitar. What I ended up playing when I moved down to Virginia was music without a drummer. A lot of the venues we were playing didn't want drums.



MA-O: That makes you in some ways a little bit more versatile, you can play in more places.

JB: When we play in a place [the music] doesn't absorb everything around it, you know? When a rock

band plays it's loud, engulfing and some drummers only have one volume. I like [the] style of music that fits whatever room it's in. I think we both get that from our experience in folk music. This is acoustic, it fits in this particular space, and when you need to make it louder, you just put a microphone on it.

MA-O: You mentioned Gypsy jazz. What's the difference between Gypsy jazz and other kinds of jazz?

DB-H: Well, I'll start off by saying [that] "gypsy" is a hot term for some people, [understandably]. So, when we say Gypsy jazz, some people say, can we find a more neutral way to describe what you're doing?

MA-O: Oh, interesting.

DB-H: Another way to say it is "*Jazz Menouche*."

Gypsy jazz is often referred to as "jazz manouche" (the French name), and "hot jazz" is another common descriptor.

DB-H: Per my understanding, [it's] a form of jazz that made its way from America, [and] was filtered through nomadic people, through Paris.

JB: Jazz happens throughout the world, and while it's happening in the U.S., the Delta Blues are happening, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington [are performing]. People are absorbing it in other parts of the world through recorded music. So once recorded music starts going overseas, what happens in Paris is that nomadic people who have folk traditions mostly through dance music start hearing this new style of music ... hearing things that are similar to their own stuff but in a different language. It's a jazz language that uses [what] they're doing, but differently. So, when you're talking about- if you're calling it Gypsy jazz, or jazz manouche, it's basically folk music meeting jazz. So the stuff that Django really absorbed [was] the "musette" style while he was in France, he was playing in dance bands. He was a kid, and he was a banjo virtuoso too.

Django Reinhardt was of Roma descent, often described as a "Romani" guitarist. He was born in Liberchies, Belgium. At the age of 8 he and his mother's Manouche community settled near the Choisy gate of "Old Paris," and as an adult he became known for creating the first ever Gypsy jazz band, the Quintette du Hot Club de France (alongside violinist Stéphane Grappelli).

JB: [Django] was proud of [the Romani] tradition. Whenever he made enough money, he just went back on the road. He wasn't trying to get out of the nomadic lifestyle.

DB-H: There is definitely a negative connotation with the word "gypsy" [though]. It's used by some people as a slur. But, when we say Gypsy jazz, I would like people to find a hint of pride in that. It's proud music and it's vital. I mean, it's still here. You play it and people immediately react to it. So when we play, it's a flag [acknowledging the music's history]. It's a proud tradition that we are grateful to be able to borrow from and ... play.

JB: We're playing real Gypsy jazz. I found the oldest recordings of some of the songs and transcribed them ... They're songs you cannot hear anywhere else. No one is jamming on Gypsy jazz waltzes. I can't get enough of it. It's really fun music. Some of it sounds very classical in style. Some of it [is] folk music, but with different rules.

DB-H: There's a real transportive quality. For me playing it, I can be feeling one way, and then as soon as I start playing it, I immediately feel the way that the music makes me feel. I bow to that feeling. And I think it does that to a space too. Which is really special thing to get to do and be a part of.

MA-O: Absolutely. Well, and I would imagine, given everything that's happened in the last year and a half, to be able to come together and create those kinds of experiences for people, that's very meaningful.

JB: We're playing a type of music that really just existed in social settings. It's music that's meant to be played in places with people. After a year of not being able to do that, it was really beautiful to just get together with someone and be like, this is music for people.

Find @birtandharley on Instagram, and go see their shows on Wednesdays at the Royal Bobcat (7pm to 9:30pm) and on Saturdays at Nick-a-Nees (4pm to 7pm).