

# Modo Stare interview

*Kate Wellham*

The very bedrock of Modo Stare's existence is one universal and all-important question; a question that defines them, both as individuals and as a creative collective; a question to which only one man on earth has ever claimed to really know the answer, while others must trust faith alone: 'Where's Jon?'

"Jon turned up to rehearsal one day and his hair was all crazy," says Chelsea. "We said 'Jon, what have you been doing?' And he'd just gone on this walk. How far was it?"

"It was 110 miles, for about a week, I just fancied it," replies Jon, deadpan. "I just thought 'I want to get out for a bit'. I took my backpack, a sleeping bag, and a map. Slept in a forest. Have you seen that film, Into The Wild? It's a true story. He dies in it, but I forgot about that part."

When band founder Jon Headley disappears for days or weeks on end, the rest of Modo Stare have learned not to worry. He always returns in time for practise, and he usually brings back presents.

"When we're singing some of the lyrics I think 'hey, this is about that walk'," beams Chelsea. Jon elaborates with a rare burst of excitement: "One of the songs is called Hayburn Wyke, which is about the place I slept on the last night, it was just amazing, all the stars and then the sun in the morning was rising across the sea just in front of me..."

The first time Jon disappeared, Modo Stare were little more than a twinkle in his eye: "I had a few months where everything seemed to be going wrong. I wasn't sleeping, I'd lost work. My phone got stolen, my laptop broke, there was some family stuff. I thought I'd go back to Wales for a while. I had a couple of ideas for songs I wanted to do, so I just spent 9-5 for a few weeks just writing and recording. I didn't tell anyone I'd left. I just kind of disappeared."

When he returned to Bradford, it was with an album full of songs which he presented to his brother and fellow Welshman Chris, and to his friends: Aussie couple Chelsea and Ryan, Dutchman Semm, and English contingent Ben and Callum. They were all gobsmacked, and Modo Stare was born. Just in time, as it turns out, to enter the Futuresound competition, where the judges were also sufficiently gobsmacked by the band's **first ever gig** to give them their second ever gig at Reading Festival, and their third at Leeds Festival. Handy facts that hopefully save us a few paragraphs banging on about how wonderful this band are live.

Chelsea and Jon are showing Vibrations around the rehearsal space they've bagged for tonight's practise. It's impressive; a spacious stage in a large auditorium, with rows of seats laid out and a balcony all the way around the room. It looks like a well-equipped students' union. Chelsea pulls out her phone to show me a photo of their usual rehearsal set-up: six people and as many keyboards stuffed into a bedroom, which she took from her spot bouncing on the bed.

Analogue Chelsea is the only one of the seven who can do that, because she's the only one who doesn't have a self-contained rig with a spaghetti of wires: "I've got a drum, a tambourine and an egg".

Tonight, though, their needs are greater, because of the latest episode in what they rightly call 'a ridiculous run'. "I got an email saying 'got some good news for you, we'd love you to play with Jamie Cullum in Sheffield'", says Jon, with a tiny smile. "So that's alright." That'll be gig number five, in case you were wondering.

Arguably, none of this would have happened were it not for the building we're in right now. They lead the way upstairs, where Chelsea points out a few other features of the facility. Here's the in-house Starbucks, and over there is the place where the van lives, which delivers hot drinks and condoms to the local working girls. Chelsea says she is excited about Christmas, which is a really big deal here. You'd expect that bit at least, with it being a church.

Membership at the Life Church might not be something that Modo Stare have talked about much - and in fact their suggestion for the interview was to meet in a pub before circumstances intervened - but to examine their success it's necessary to examine this absolutely fundamental part of it.

Not least because Modo Stare aren't the only wildcards that this place has produced. Two years ago, the winners of the Futuresound competition to play at Leeds and Reading Festival were a band called The Coopers, who had little or no profile within the Leeds music scene, and seemingly came out of nowhere to steal the much-coveted prize. Three members of that four-piece are also in Modo Stare. Throw in Gareth Gates if you must, and it seems there's something in the water at the Life Church.

Chelsea understands any cynicism: "I think there's a lot of stigma attached to big churches. Even for us when we first came here, we might have been like 'hmm, big church', but you can't argue with changed lives. I can't argue with seeing Jon completely different." She goes on to describe Jon when he first arrived as being too shy to sing, and almost to speak: "I nearly cried when I finally saw him singing because I knew he'd come from being so painfully shy to just being able to get out there and do his thing. I'm so proud of him." Understated as ever, Jon offers "I probably wouldn't have done this stuff back in Wales."

So this is some kind of spiritual drama school? "It's more like it's super empowering," says Chelsea, "so music's a big aspect of it but everyone's encouraged to work with their strengths, whether that's starting a business or fashion or community stuff. It's a big world out there."

There's a particularly young and international congregation here, and some impressive facilities for musicians. Photos and videos from some of their events could easily have been shot at the O2 Academy or similar. By the time a gifted performer has experienced a set-up and a reception like that on a regular basis, it's easy to see how they'd pop out confident and ready to hit the

circuit running.

Modo Stare don't sound like you'd expect them to sound, having formed in a church - nothing stereotypically twee or cheesy here. They're huge, seductive, dreamlike and otherworldly. Their supremely confident live performance receives their enthusiastic and impassioned all, and that's only to the benefit of the show.

Each member of Modo Stare gravitated to this particular church individually, and of their own accord. Many of them came to take courses, but Chelsea is open about the fact that she first came over to meet 'international men': "The main pastor of this church, she's pretty renowned speaker, and I heard her speak in Australia. I thought 'I'd like to go to England'.

"I think I thought that English boys were really hot, even though I'm with an Australian now. I just said 'does your church do internships, can I come to England', and I just left. Now that I look back it seems crazy."

Jon: "Same for me really."

Chelsea: "Yeah Jon came to find an English man too." (From the look on his face, probably not so much).

Even before finding out that they're members here, it was obvious that there was something a little off about Modo Stare. They're so fucking happy, for a start, and modest, and grateful, and just so horrendously pleasant to everyone. How they've managed to get anywhere with attitudes like that is shocking. To balance it out, Semm often gets overwhelmed mid-set and throws a chair across the room.

As these warm, funny and talented musicians continue to experience a great deal of success, it's inevitable that they'll attract some curiosity for displaying an open belief in something. It would be wrong - if the band credit so much of their success to one huge and evidently beneficial part of their lives - if they were ever made to feel that they should conceal it and take the credit entirely for themselves.



