

Mollag Bands

A Manx tradition for the Christmas season

A short overview



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Introduction

In the lead-up to Christmas, including Christmas Eve, groups of between 6 or 12 people (traditionally men or boys) would go out in costume.

They would go around singing and playing music raucously, in the hope of earning themselves some money from those listening. They would parade the streets, walk into shops and 'take possession of' them for their singing or stroll into houses where the door was found open.

"the town has been infested with these dreadful nuisances, and their uncouth appearances as well as their "music" and the usual accompaniment of the cries of the small fry who follow after them have caused anything but the most pleasant sensation." [*Manx Sun*, 17/12/1892]

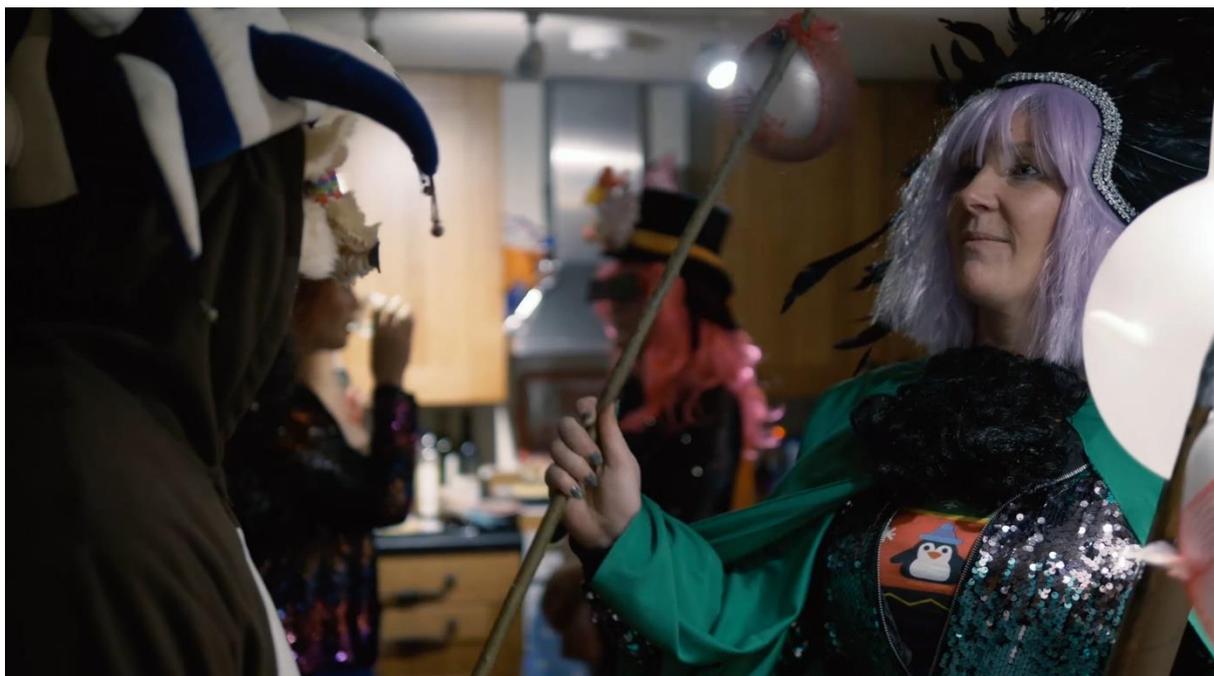
The Mollag

A part of the unruliness was the mollag:

"MOLLAG [molag] (Mx.), an inflated sheepskin tarred and used as a buoy to float herring nets." [*Vocabulary of the Anglo-Manx Dialect*, 1924]

This should be attached to a stick and used to hit anyone who came too close as the band strolled down the streets.

"They used to go round with bladders, sheep's bladders or pig's bladders on sticks and they would be clouting people, you see, and making them give them some money in the streets." [Robert Cormode, MNH Folk Life Survey interview, 1971]



Costume

The members of the mollah band were dressed in a way which disguised them and made them utterly different to what was normal.

They wore 'fantastic costumes.' This would be clothes that were foreign or strange to them, including turning their coats inside out. Traditionally this included blackening their faces and hands with burnt cork.

"...just a bit of fun dressing up in any article of clothing which didn't belong to you - the more 'guy-like' the better; faces and hands were blackened with burnt cork"
[Alice A. Watterson, MNH Folk Life Survey interview, 1950-51]

A very specific description of a uniform from Castletown also exists, but it is hard to reconcile this with the other accounts.

The Skit

The Skit is the fool character, who, at least in Castletown, dressed as a bear and performed tricks such as standing on his head & somersaulting, as well as pretending to 'Die for his country,' and then rising to 'Salute the King.'

The head of the bear costume was reported to have been made 'of pasteboard'.

"one of their number dressed up to represent a bear and would have a chain attached to him. He would be covered with old matting similar to the matting that the salt fish came in. The bear would receive his orders from the conductor as follows: 'Incabon, Head-a-Heel!' And the bear would turn a somersault. After that he would lift a collection" [Charles Watterson, MNH Folk Life Survey interview, 1950]



Dance

The mollag bands were said to have danced, but no complete instructions for a dance were collected. All we have are a few loose anecdotes:

- Leaping high in the air and shouting ‘at rhythmic intervals’
- Dancing ‘in a circle with a peculiar spiral action of the body, without joining hands’
- ‘a tripping step [was] used in the dance’
- ‘the High Reel Step would come into it’

Again, a fuller description of a dance exists, but it is hard to reconcile with the other accounts.



Music

Instruments were played, mostly unruly, homemade, ridiculous or loud.

Things mentioned as being played include: drum, concertina, mouth organ, tin whistle, triangle, cymbals, Jew’s-harp, tin cans, combs covered with tissue paper etc. The kazoo could also be included.

“They made a rare din.” [Sir J D Qualtrough, *Castletown: Some Notes on Its History*]

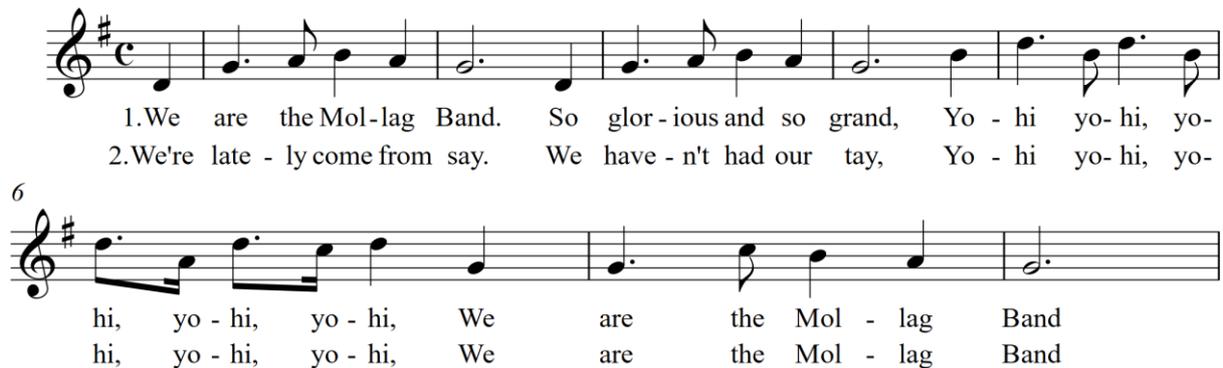
“Their performance would certainly charm no birds out of the bush.” [Charles Watterson, MNH Folk Life Survey interview, 1950]

Song

Part of a marching song exists. It would probably have been more shouted than sung. Some of the song's words would likely have been improvised or "made-up" in each performance. A key theme was the singers praising themselves, probably in order to justify their demands for money.

"Some of their singing was pretty hard to listen to, due, no doubt, to the easy way they sang." [John Comish, MNH Folk Life Survey interview, 1950-1955]

The Mollag Band Song



1. We are the Mol-lag Band. So glor-ious and so grand, Yo - hi yo-hi, yo-
2. We're late - ly come from say. We have - n't had our tay, Yo - hi yo-hi, yo-

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hi, yo - hi, yo - hi, We are the Mol - lag Band
hi, yo - hi, yo - hi, We are the Mol - lag Band

Lyrics from Leighton Stowell:

We are the Mollag Band,
So glorious and so grand,
Ye-ho, ye-ho,
Before we take our ease,
It's you we intend to please.

[We are the Mollag Band]
A true and faithful band...

Lyrics from Mona Douglas:

We are the Mollag Band,
So glorious and so grand,
Yo-hi, yo-hi, yo-hi, yo-hi, yo-hi,
We are the Mollag Band.

We're likely come from say,
We haven't had our "tay,"
Yo-hi, yo-hi, yo-hi, yo-hi, yo-hi,
We are the Mollag Band.



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