

Jason Webley biography

IN THE SPRING of 1998 Jason Webley quit his day job, picked up his accordion, and hopped on a Greyhound bus with the intention of playing in the streets until his money ran out. Seven years, four albums and over a dozen countries later, Webley is still rambling across state lines and howling at the tomato moon. Along the way, Webley has garnered devoted fans from Moscow to Saskatoon, and built up a cult following larger and wilder than any accordion player's dreams.

Best known for his solo performances, Webley appears

like a back alley prophet in layers of baggy clothes, a trench coat and an old porkpie hat; he leaps onto stages, window ledges and bartops, feverishly pumping the bellows and stomping out the beat while roaring and whispering in his passionate, gravelly baritone. His music – a mix of gypsy, folk and punk – traverses age and social background, drawing grandparents, children, punks, drunks, and lovers into the fold. As a *Seattle Weekly* critic observed, “sixteen-year-old Goths, parents with little kids, aging hippies and fellow musicians – all can be seen at his concerts.”

In truth, Webley's shows are much more than musical events. Stories, puppet shows and sing-alongs fill in the spaces between songs. In one moment, spellbound by Webley's lyrical verse and mysterious air, the audience will be so quiet you can hear a feather fall; in the next, the entire room will erupt into a giant tickle fight or a goofy gnome dance. Playful abandon and childlike frivolity permeate the air. It's contagious. Everyone laughs. Some people cry. And, almost every show ends with the entire audience, swaying arm-in-arm, singing at the top of their lungs.

Beyond the accordion, Webley plays a variety of instruments - guitar, piano, and most memorably a plastic vodka bottle full of pennies. With degrees in sound engineering and theater, he produces and records all of his albums himself and builds most of the elaborate props for his shows. The lino-cut prints that adorn his album covers and t-shirts are also carved by his own hand.

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Well known in Seattle for being a bit of a prankster, Webley once surprised the crew and passengers on a local commuter ferry by leading aboard a group of hundreds of fans dressed as pirates. That same year at

Seattle's Bumbershoot Festival, Webley was arrested after a zealous crowd pushed him to the top of the International Fountain. Recently, he staged a series of guerilla “musicals” in local supermarkets.

Long-time fans have come to anticipate two very special annual performances. For the

past five years, around Halloween, Jason Webley has “died,” symbolically shedding his stage persona for the winter. At the first death his fans were led into the woods where Webley was stripped, shaved, placed in a coffin and driven away, not to be heard from for six months. In subsequent years he has been carried away by a siren on a boat, left overnight tied to a tree, and swallowed in a maelstrom of balloons. Then every spring, after half a year of silence, Webley has been “reborn.” First emerging from a coffin with a new clean-cut look and a completely different repertoire, subsequent births have found him swimming through near-freezing water to a show on a moored cruise ship and emerging from a cocoon like a butterfly.

Between the spring and Halloween concerts, Webley keeps an unrelenting tour schedule, playing as many as 150 concerts in six months. In addition to venues across the US and Canada, he travels annually to Europe and Russia (he has become something of a minor celebrity in Moscow).

Last year, however, saw a shift in this pattern. During his most recent Halloween concert, Webley reenacted all four of the previous deaths, indicating that a cycle had been completed.

A shift can be heard in the music as well. Last spring, Webley released *Only Just*

Beginning, his fourth and purportedly final album. Moving away from the harsh voice and dark moods of his earlier efforts, the new album marks a distinct change, one that favors lush orchestration and a more direct vocal and lyrical approach. The transformation has been lauded by critics and fans alike. *San Francisco Weekly* writes, “*Only Just Beginning* is by far Webley's most sincere and direct work. Some longtime fans might miss his surreal humor and lyrical trickery, but they will find longer-lasting blooms in his humanity.”

Jason Webley has shared the stage with the Dresden Dolls, the Faint, Damien Jurado, Against Me, Laura Veirs, Deerhoof, Xiu Xiu, Against Me and the Groovie Ghoulies. He has toured Australia, Russia, Germany, the Netherlands, England, the Ukraine and many other countries, and performed in hundreds of venues including CBGBs, the Gilman Street Project, Burning Man and the Glastonbury Festival.

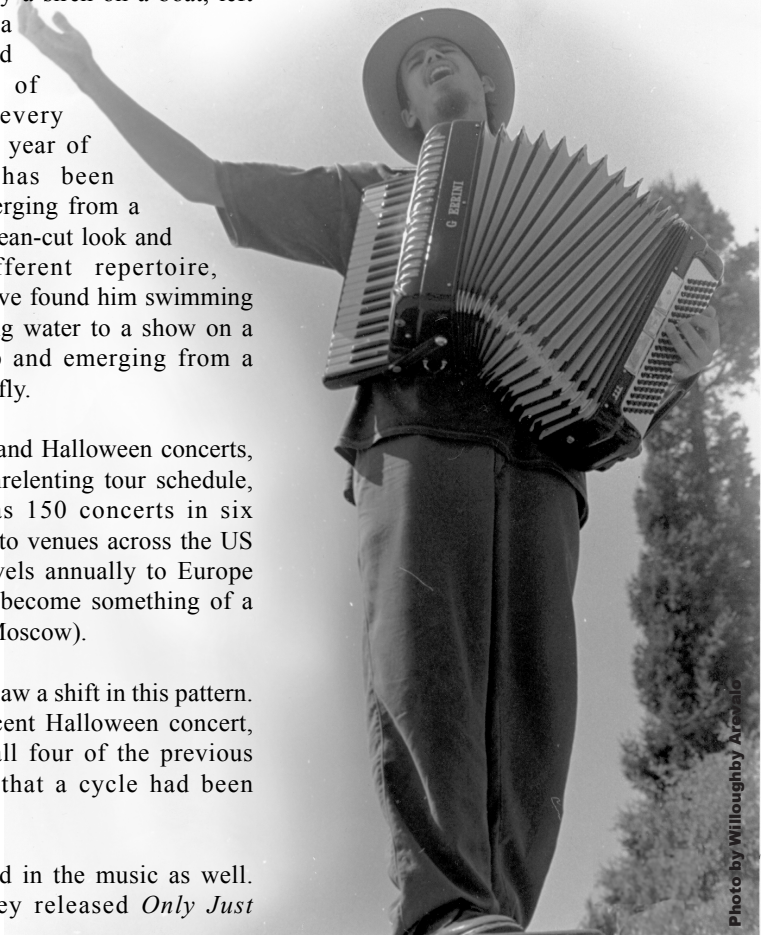


Photo by Willoughby Armitage



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Jason Webley in the media



Photo by Jeff Harms

"Webley howls at the rafters with the courage and conviction of a long-gone sailor, and seduces the candlelight with melodies as delicate as a gossamer balloon; he pumps the bellows like a Romanian wedding singer and feathers the keys like a desert drifter."

-*San Francisco Weekly*

"It's his voice – a sandpaper baritone swelling at once with desolation and intoxicated goofiness – that keeps 'em coming back."

- *Seattle Times*

"Insightful and earnest songs bring you to tears. Make you sob like your mother died. Then, with his genius showing like toilet paper on the shoe of a priest, Webley turns his music into a drunken bar fight."

-*Pop Culture Press*

"As the beats grew stronger, a trunk in the middle of the stage opened and a shirtless, thinly framed, shaggy-haired man shook and twitched his way into a standing position from inside. At the sight of him, the audience went crazy. This was Jason Webley... Once out of the box, Webley owned the audience. The fans danced along the aisles for song after song as he took them on a journey through sadness, happiness and just plain craziness."

-*The Stranger*

"To experience his hypnotic whimsy is absolutely amazing. Who ever thought that an accordion could cause tears of joy?"

-*In Your Ear Magazine*

"For all of his tomfoolery, his odd fascination with carrots and feathers, his habit of interrupting concerts to read children's stories... it is sometimes easy to forget that [Jason Webley] is one of Seattle's most talented musicians, a singer-songwriter with a rare gift for crafting timeless songs that approach Waits and Leonard Cohen territory."

-*Seattle Times*

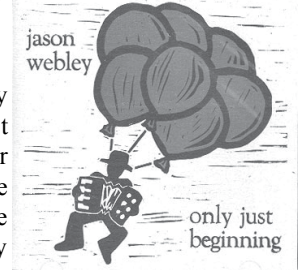
Praise for *Only Just Beginning*:

"A powerful album."

-*Seattle Times*

"An exquisitely varied album that references his earlier music while showcasing his move toward an entirely new sound."

-*Seattle Weekly*



"His albums have always emphasized the delicate, mindful quality of his craft... While musically inventive, and sometimes peculiar, 'Only Just Beginning' is by far Webley's most sincere and direct work. Some longtime fans might miss his surreal humor and lyrical trickery, but they will find longer-lasting blooms in his humanity."

-*San Francisco Weekly*

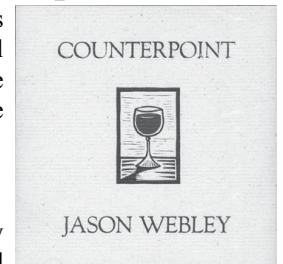
"Webley has come a long way from the street performer he once was."

-*American Music Press*

Praise for *Counterpoint*:

"This is a marvelous recording that will stand as one of the best Seattle CDs of the year"

-*Seattle Times*



"This is a wildly eccentric album and one that makes no apologies for that. Webley refuses to play by anyone else's rules, marrying genres and time periods with seeming abandon and making it work, every single time. This is a unique album and well worth your time."

-*Robotfist*

On this, the minstrel's third full length, Webley has captured himself more intimately and softly... Here he is quieter, looming in sadness, heartache and tender lullabies with a band of assorted odd instruments to back him up - tubas, banjoes, bowls, a shovel and a carillon on loan from the Cathedral of St. John in Spokane, to name a few."

-*Tablet*



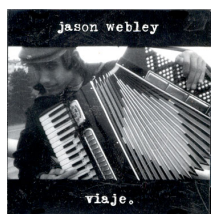
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Jason Webley time-line

1998

In July, the first album, *Viaje*, is released. Jason begins street performing. He spends the



summer traveling across the country by Greyhound bus and returns to his hometown Seattle to become a regular opener for the local cult band, ¡Tchkung!

1999

Jason begins to develop his own following in Seattle, playing regularly at the now-defunct Pearl Café. As a street performer, he travels across Canada during the fringe theater season and begins his appearances at Seattle's Bumbershoot and Folklife festivals. He first works with drummer Michael McQuilken, and finishes the year by releasing his second album, *Against the Night*.

2000

After a jaunt to Australia for the Adelaide Fringe Festival, Jason once again hits the Canadian Fringe circuit, this time drawing the attention of CBC Radio and Much Music Television, and landing on the front cover of Victoria's *Monday Magazine*. He begins calling attention to his act with a large stuffed carrot and a sign that reads "Follow the Carrot!" This year also marks the beginning of his work with bassist Jherik Bischoff.

Just before Halloween, Jason's Seattle fans get a surprise. At the end of his final concert at the Pearl Café, the crowd follows a giant tomato into the woods where Jason is shaved, stripped naked, placed into a coffin and driven away. Not a word is heard from him for six months.

2001

Jason is re-born on his actual birthday (June 1) at Seattle's Paradox Theater. He has all new songs, a new clean-cut look, a larger band (with the addition of a small horn section) and a rusty shovel to bang out the beat. Moving away from street performance, Jason begins "real" tours of actual concert venues, including the Gilman Street Project in Berkeley. Back in Seattle, he holds a "Killing Time" concert where the audience throws rotten tomatoes at a ghoulish 20 foot tall grandfather clock.

Again, come Halloween, Jason departs, this time leading the audience to the waterfront, where a woman in white whisks him into the night on an old rustic boat. Fans fill the water with little candlelit paper ships while singing the chorus of one of his songs, "Goodbye Forever Once Again."

2002

The first concert of the year takes place on the beautiful Scansonia Ferry. Jason swims through the near freezing water and climbs aboard. Shortly after, his third album, *Counterpoint*, is released. Later, keeping with the nautical theme, he leads a group of 300 fans to an impromptu concert on a local commuter ferry, dressed as pirates.



His tour schedule takes him farther afield – from Moscow, Idaho to Moscow, Russia, where he has since become something of a minor celebrity. Back at home, his now-famous stints at Bumbershoot come to a halt when he leads a crowd into the International Fountain at the Seattle Center and is arrested.

Just after Halloween, he gives his final concert at the Paradox Theater. At the end of the night, he is carried on a pole into the woods and left tied to a tree overnight while feathers fall slowly to the ground.

2003

At the first concert of the year, Jason emerges from a cocoon in the form of a beautiful half-size puppet built by local puppeteer Adam Ende. Immediately after, Jason and his puppet begin

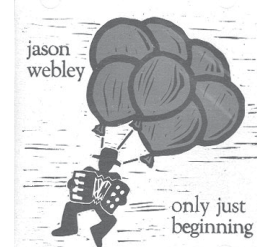


a relentless touring schedule, playing over 150 concerts in six months. He returns to Russia and tours extensively in Europe, the US and Canada. He finds himself everywhere from Burning Man to England's prestigious Glastonbury Festival.

The year ends on November 1st with a sold out concert at Seattle's Town Hall. At the end of the night, the puppet's heart is removed and the audience follows the little body in a funeral procession into nearby Freeway Park. Each of the 900 fans ties a helium balloon to the puppet's body. Despite heavy rain, the balloons lift little Jason over the city and into the night.

2004

Jason begins the year by releasing his fourth and purportedly final album, *Only Just Beginning*. At the release concert, Jason makes his entrance in the form of a new and much happier looking puppet. The new remote-control Jason dances, squeezes the accordion and is held afloat by large red balloons – an image borrowed from the cover of the new record.



After another unrelenting touring season, Jason again returns to Seattle for his autumn concert. This time, the audience is divided into four sections: balloons, feathers, boats and tomatoes, with colored head-bands and songs for each camp. At the end of the night, the audience is led on a parade through downtown Seattle, where Jason relives each of his previous deaths (by balloon, feather, boat and tomato). At each station, a woman representing one of the four deaths strips away part of Jason's persona – his hat, accordion, clothes and hair. After again being shaved and stripped, he and the four women climb into a car decorated to look like a giant tomato and disappear onto the freeway.

2005

After completing the cycle of four albums and four deaths and resurrections, it seems that Jason is up to something new. For the first time in five years, he plays a handful of concerts in the winter (including a series of guerilla "musicals" in local supermarkets and opening for the Dresden Dolls). And instead of a spring concert, he has announced that his fans are invited to attend Camp Tomato, an afternoon of games and activities in Seattle's Woodland Park.



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Jason Webley photos

High resolution scans of these images and more available on-line at: <http://www.jasonwebley.com/press/images.html>



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