



SCOTTISH ROOTS - ANCIENT INFLUENCES ON TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

by Paul Brett

Having reviewed for Music Maker a few of Scottish Label Greentrax's excellent CD's, I decided to delve further into the origins of Scottish Folk Music to enhance my knowledge of some of my own family music traditions and improve my understanding of this genre.

Wikipedia, the on line free encyclopaedia says " Scottish traditional music, although both influencing and being influenced by Irish Traditional Music, is very much a creature unto itself, and, despite the popularity of various international pop music forms, remains a vital and living tradition." Probably not quite in the same vital tradition as the "old firm" derby's ! but I was brought up with an aural perception of what it means to be Scottish or in my case, part. One of my uncle's, John "Jock" Hutcheson was a professional footballer who played initially for Falkirk, then moved to Chelsea and ended his career at Ipswich Town. He also played for Scotland in the pre WW2 side.

The earliest mention of the highland bagpipe was in the 1400's, but these particular instruments could have been used much earlier. I guess most people associate Scottish traditional music with the bagpipes and still the image



of the lone piper playing on the walls of Edinburgh Castle at the yearly Military Tattoo brings shivers to my spine, conjuring legends of heroic deeds down through the centuries. I wrote this poem many years ago when I was in the highlands musing on my surroundings and more aggressive and oppressive times for the country.

I stand where Chieftains stood, I see what Chieftains saw

*The bleakness of the Highlands in Winter
Although Summer less they hold a rare
individual beauty*

*Rushing streams, soft white snow
The sometimes morning sun that melts ice into
the spring
Cascading, changing, becoming the gushing
torrent of a mountain stream*

*O if I were a proud Scottish Chieftain
I would have resented bitterly the tread of
English Redcoat boot upon the heather
Summer or Winter, those who came to subdue
the Piper's mist cloaked sounds have passed
Beauty and legend cannot die, neither can the
spirit of those that stand against oppression.*

Historical Scottish "Piping Clans" included some great names, the MacArthurs, MacDonalds, McKays and the MacCrimmon, who were the legendary pipers of the Clan MacLeod. The Harp or (Clasarch) has also been a strong feature in this genre way back as far as the 9th century. Accordions, Guitars, Tin Whistles and Fiddles came into prominence much later but put all these instruments into the hands of Celtic Musicians and you have one hell of a combination of sounds. Add to that the vocal stories of folklore through the centuries, sung in traditional Gaelic or English and you have the format for some of the most beautiful, stirring and swirling music of our times. I defy anyone not to tap their feet to a jig or a reel or be emotionally moved by a haunting Ballad. Scottish and Irish music also formed the basis for American Country Music which owes much to these Celtic traditions. There is also much to laud in Welsh traditional music although it hasn't travelled as well as Irish or Scottish, possibly because of the reluctance by those currently in control of it's distribution, to release recordings of a bi-lingual nature. There is a fervour to promote the Welsh Language in favour of all other languages. This Nationalistic attitude by those who mould the releases, in my opinion, severely limits the opportunities for many fine Welsh artistes to display their vast talents to a World market. I am impressed with labels like



Greentrax in Scotland because even with their Gaelic CD's, they release sleeve notes for those of us reviewers who are not versed in it to understand the nature of the content and therefore it makes for a wider scope for reviews, especially in the English media which is vast globally. I am also impressed by the whole professional approach of Greentrax, from

the clarity of it's recorded product to the presentation and packaging of such.



The man behind the label is **Ian Green**, an ex Police Inspector who started the label in 1986. In 2005. Ian received the Hamish Henderson Award for services to traditional music in recognition for his work in tradi-

tional Scottish music over almost 50 years. FolkRoots Magazine said of Greentrax " it's now he undisputed frontrunner among Scottish labels". Greentrax has an extensive catalogue of CD's and you can view this on <http://www.greentrax.com/index.htm>

Like all Folk Music genres, the 1960's saw the best and biggest revival in Global interest. In fact, it was a Scot, Ewan McColl, who founded one of the first Folk Clubs in Britain and pro-



Dick Gaughan

moted (if somewhat narrowly) much of the early traditionalist revival. Other artistes from Scotland included Alex Campbell, Hamish Imlach, Dick Gaughan, The

Corries, The MacCalmans, Jean Redpath and of course, The Incredible String Band to name but a few, were spreading their talents across the UK and beyond whilst Andy Stewart was



The Incredible String Band

still performing his very Scottish Shows.



Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger



Ewan McColl married Peggy Seeger who was herself, a fine American banjo player with a long family history in roots music. Her brother, Pete Seeger, was himself a world name and I personally have to give him great credit for keeping the 12 string guitar alive in a very dark period for the instrument. Along with Dick Rossmini, Fred Gerlach, John Joyce (UK) and of course The Rooftop Singers (who had a massive hit with Gus Cannon's old song "Walk right In" using two Gibson B45 12 strings, one left and the other right handers) they kept the 12 string alive in recorded music until Leo Kottke burst on the scene with his unique style of blending traditional and contemporary styles into a fusion of technical excellence.

But the most influential musician of his age as



Davy Graham (left) with Martin Carthy

far as guitar picking was concerned in my opinion was Davy Graham. He was the catalyst for Bert Jansch, John Renbourn, Martin Carthy, Gordon Giltrap and a host of other guitar luminaries. His instrumental "Angie" was and is a masterpiece. God knows why the man hasn't been given the total credit he rightly deserves by the media and industry for his vast contribution to contemporary folk music ?

The 70's saw the emergence of the excellent Battlefield Band and Aly Bain's Boys of the Loch were cutting some fine instrumental tracks. On the Rock side, I have to say that Alex Harvey gave some great live performances. I worked with Alex at Twickenham's Eel Pie Island club a few times and his energy and vocal ability was one of the best I have seen. His version of the Osmonds "White Horses" was awesome. The 80's saw Robin Morton's much acclaimed recording of "A Controversy of Pipers" hit the streets. Celtic Roots Music will always be a constant inspiration for musicians through the ages and I'm sure that many more styles will be adapted from its roots to keep future generations of players and listeners entertained for many years to come. I cannot end this short piece by not mentioning the fantastic vocal talents of Maggie Bell. I hear that Maggie is performing again in a band with Zoot Money, another legend who has contributed much to British Rock Music over the years. No they are not Folk Musicians, but they are great musicians and Maggie should have been a World StarTioraidh!