

CD & DVD Reviews

Jim Malcolm "Sparkling Flash" Beltane Records, 2011



The latest work of Scotland's great singer/songwriter Jim Malcolm is one of those albums that has grown more on me on repeated hearing. Certainly the album is throughout wonderful and appealing humming-along material. And while a few songs may be pleasant but not memorable, there are a number of real gems on offer. Jim's version of the Robert Burns song "Farewell to the Bonny Banks of Ayr" has a Latin swing to it (which suits the song perfectly!), and there is an excellent version of the traditional classic "The Bonny Ship the Diamond". And there are two songs written by Jim which stand out by being quite different in style to the rest of the album - "Suzi Wallenburg" is pleasantly jazzy and features also the current Old Blind Dogs line-up, while the bonus track "Song for St Johnstone", a tribute to Perth football team's promotion to the Premier Division, features Jim on electric guitar with a great and memorable chorus. More of this stuff please!

www.jimmalcolm.com

Most songs feature primarily Jim, with the occasional addition of keyboards or fiddle or backing vocals from his lovely wife Susie.

Overall maybe not the best, but a very good Jim Malcolm album.

© Michael Moll

Alasdair Fraser & Natalie Haas "Highlander's Farewell"

Culburnie/Greentrax, 2011



The delight to listen to two real masters of traditional music. Scottish fiddler extraordinaire Alasdair Fraser is teaming on this album once again up with cellist Natalie Haas, who has managed to make the cello an integral instrument to Scottish traditional music. This quite unique combination of fiddle and cello gives the Scottish tunes a somewhat different beautiful sound with a classical edge to it. The album offers a mix of better and lesser known tunes as well as some of Alasdair's compositions. You can feel the passion that these two musicians put into their music, and you can also experience on some tunes the sounds of a 1760 German violin. To give full justice to this album, and to fully appreciate it, you do need to take the time to sit down and listen to the music.

www.alasdairfraser.com
www.nataliehaas.com

© Michael Moll

Paul McKenna Band "Stem the Tide"

Greentrax, 2011



The debut album of the Paul McKenna Band was a real stunner. After such an excellent debut, expectations are very high for the follow-up album, and it is not unusual that the second album cannot match the magic of the first. I am pleased to say though that in this case, the Paul McKenna Band's new album can meet the same top standard that the first album had.

www.paulmckennaband.com

"Stem the tide" is another superb album sounding fresh and full of energy. The songs on the album are an attractive mix of traditional, contemporary and self-penned ones, all of which are not too commonly heard in the folk circles, and all tell stories. My personal highlights are probably the band's impressive version of Lionel McClelland's "Silent Majority", and Paul McKenna's song "Dreams of Darien" telling the story of the failed attempt by Scotland to establish a trading colony on the Isthmus of Panama. The musicianship and the musical arrangements are superb throughout, featuring the talents of Paul (vocals, guitar, bouzouki), David McNee (Bouzouki, tenor guitar), Ruairidh MacMillan (Fiddle), Sean Gray (flute, whistle, guitar) and Ewan Baird (Bodhran, percussion).

This album confirms that the Paul McKenna Band is in the front league of new bands in the Celtic folk circuit. Top stuff.

© Michael Moll

Robin Laing "Whisky for Breakfast" Greentrax, 2011



This is already the fourth whisky themed album of Scottish singer/songwriter Robin Laing. I had not caught up with Robin Laing CDs since his first whisky album, "The Angels Share", thus I do not know the style of the albums inbetween - but I was certainly surprised by the style of "Whisky for Breakfast". I expected an album of gentle singing with quite subtle folky accompaniment - but this album was very different.

www.robinlaing.com

Produced by "Pearlfisher" David Scott, the dominant style of the songs is Scottish influenced Country. Overall, despite Country being not my thing, this is an album that I overall am still quite happy to listen to and hum along (even more so after a few drams!), and I have to admit that it works quite well with Robin's songs. This is with one exception, the title track which is dominated by in my view horrible keyboard sounds that really spoil what could have been a good song.



There are a couple of songs with a completely different, folky style and could have been from a completely different album. My highlight here is the song "Wee cooper of Fife" which is a superb lively folky song with some attractive folk rock interlude - now this is my cup of tea or rather my glass of whisky! So more of that please!

Of course the themes of the songs, all written by Robin, is great - whisky - celebrating the drop as well as telling stories from the history of whisky making.

© Michael Moll

Various Artists "Scottish Tradition 24 - Songs and Ballads"

from Perthshire - Field Recordings of the 1950s"

Greentrax, 2011


The Scottish Tradition series is one of the real labours of love from Greentrax, featuring historically important folk music field recordings of many of the great Scottish traditions bearers from the last century. The recordings were collected by the School of Scottish Studies, which was founded 60 years ago this year.

This album features songs from primarily the Travelling community of Perthshire in the 1950s. The contributions include well known traditional singers such as Belle and Sheila Steward, as well as lesser known ones. All songs are unaccompanied and pure. What makes the music come even more to life are the vivid booklet notes from Maurice Fleming, who collected these recordings, describing the characters and how he met them and recorded their songs. It is not a CD you would listen to in the background over dinner, it is not a CD that will attract a wide market. But in its purity it has its own charme, and it will be no doubt an inspiration to those interest in the oral tradition "originals" of the traditional songs featured.

© Michael Moll

Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino "Focu d'Amore"

Ponderosa Music & Art, 2011

 Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino is a well established traditional music band from Salento, Puglia in Italy, which was started already some 35 years ago, with some 16 recordings. Their latest offering features stylistically quite wide ranging Southern Italian roots music. There are the so typical energetic Pizzica Pizzicas, there are a few very slow somewhat esoteric songs, some songs feature some very attractive brass music giving the lively charme of a Southern village festival, others venture into world music. The main female vocals, featured on most of the titles, is for my liking a bit too dominant and shrill - so overall the album is unfortunately not quite my thing, while it clearly has some very interesting and attractive elements.

www.canzonieregrecanicosalentino.net

© Michael Moll

Riccardo Tesi & Banditaliana "Madreperla"

Materiali Soni, 2011

I can hardly believe that it is already 6 years ago since the last Banditaliana album ("Lune"). Now in its 18th year, the band comes with their latest album with a very strong one indeed.

www.riccardotesi.com

Banditaliana's sound remains the same unique and highly distinctive style dominated by Riccardo Tesi's versatile diatonic accordion playing, combined with the saxophone of Claudio Carboni and the vocals and guitar of Maurizio Geri. New band member is percussionist Gigi Biolcati.

Overall I find that the new album sounds somewhat more relaxed, more gentle and slightly more mellow than the previous ones. Which does not mean that the music is less versatile or innovative - and again there are some influences from other world music such as Arab, Middle Eastern and Gipsy. There are more songs on this album than previously, and otherwise

it is the same top quality music that we know from this great band. This may well be their best album so far!

© Michael Moll

Brian McNeill "The Road Never Questions - The Best of Brian McNeill Volume 1"

Greentrax, 2011

Fiddler, singer, songwriter, bouzouki player Brian McNeill has been for decades one of the prime Scottish ambassadors for quality Scottish folk music - from his days with the Battlefield Band right through his solo and duo career. This is a compilation of some of Brian McNeill's favourite tracks from his solo and duo albums, stretching back to 1978. Brian states that he found it difficult to select the tracks for this compilation, but the result could not have been much better. It features a highly attractive collection of songs and tunes, and despite quite a wide ranging approach to traditional Scottish music. There are songs and tunes from his duo collaborations with Tom McDonagh and the late great Iain MacKintosh, from his master piece "The Back O The North Wind" and from all the other solo albums he has recorded. There is also one track from an album he produced as Head of Scottish Music at the Royal Academy of Music and Drama, played in with some students.


www.brianmcneill.co.uk

Brian did not make the mistake of putting the titles in chronological order, and this is one of the reasons why the album sounds coherent. This is a compilation which is a real joy to listen to. And I note that Brian calls this "The Best of Brian McNeill Volume 1" - I am not sure if he is waiting for the next 8 albums to compile Volume 2 or if he has other plans. I did notice though that his last album, "The Baltic tae Byzantium" from 2009, is not featured here - so only 7 albums to go until Vol 2?

© Michael Moll

Lily Neill "The Habit of a Foreign Sky"

Own label, 2011

 An American harpist playing music from several traditions, Lily Neill is an innovator and composer in the same league as Ailie Robertson, Máire Ní Chathasaigh, or Catriona McKay. Here she plays old and new material from Ireland, Scotland and Finland, as well as six tracks of her own tunes ranging from American swing to light classical. Lily obviously felt that her foot-tapping *Life on Wheels* was good enough to be included twice on this recording, once as a band arrangement and once as a harp solo: I'm inclined to agree, it's a fabulous piece.

www.lilyneill.com

Most music is ephemeral - they play, you listen, and it's over. This recording is somehow different - the mood and the melody stay with you, there's a rapport which lasts beyond the last note. It's not just that you want to put the CD on again: it's more like an affection for the music. Lily Neill's performance is not overly flamboyant, there's a gentleness of touch, but her music strikes deep - it certainly touched me in a way few albums do. Whether it's the traditional reel *Sergeant Early's Dream* or the post-modern experimentation of *Beneath a Balcony*, this music has a warmth and spirit which is rare indeed.

Lily's other compositions here include the graceful *It Was Early*, the punchy *Bedford Row*, and the jazzy *Johnny*. Her complex jig *The Clear Coaster* is paired with one of Sean Ryan's tunes,

and there are two fine sets of Irish reels too. *Loftus Jones* completes the Hibernian helping, but Phil Cunningham's soaring air *Lady Ramsey* is only a small step away. The Finnish pieces are rather different: a harp and keyboards arrangement of three traditional polskas, and a flowing modern tango with violin and cello. I felt the fiddler could have taken more risks on *Rannalla* and *Life on Wheels*, but otherwise the accompaniment is spot on. Almost two thirds of *The Habit of a Foreign Sky* is solo harp, and you never feel there should be more: the recording is very detailed, clean and sharp, but still full of life. This CD could well be one of my favourites for 2011.

© Alex Monaghan

Yale Strom & Hot Pstromi "Absolutely Klezmer 2"

Transcontinental Music, 2007

I'm tempted to say "Never mind the quality, feel the width" - but this marathon CD is not just about quantity. Of the seventeen tracks here, most are great pieces of Jewish music: the poignancy

www.yalestrom.com

of *The Bride's Lament* or *Vizhnitser Nign*, the exotic exuberance of Freylachs and Horas, and the earthy emotions and laconic wit of songs such as *Lekhayim* or *The Mother-in Law*. Yale Strom has assembled all the key ingredients of great klezmer on this recording. There's his own weeping fiddle, the powerful expressive voice of Elizabeth Schwartz, the deep throbbing accordion of Peter Stan, and the woodwind virtuosity of Norbert Stachel on clarinet, sax and flute. Jim Whitney's double bass is solid throughout too, bowed or plucked. One or two of the arrangements didn't work for me, and there's an odd tendency for the woodwind to lag behind the beat on some tracks, but most of the time this quintet is tight and thrilling. From understated beauty on *Dobranotsh* to full-throated abandon for *Knayfl's Freylekhs*, there's plenty to enjoy here. *Mitsve Tants*, *Londre*, *The Youngest Daughter's Wedding* and other highlights exemplify the zest for life and the extremes of emotion expressed in European Jewish music from Brooklyn to the Balkans.

© Alex Monaghan

Devine Waters "Devine Waters"

Own Label, 2010

A second innovative CD from uilleann piper John Devine, and this time it's a family affair: John's wife Caz plays sax, their son Joe plucks guitars and banjo, and Pete Waters

www.johndevinemusic.com

provides vocals. There are a couple of guests, but the core of Devine Waters is this foursome - hence the name. There are four songs, four instrumentals, and one track which truly combines both. The final ten minutes provides what John describes as "audio sleeve-notes", a great idea: all the information you could want about the making of this album, delivered vocally over a soundscape of clips and out-takes, informative and fun.

On the instrumental side, John is a competent journeyman piper and rattles through old favourites such as *The Lark in the Morning*, *The Haunted House*, *Cregg's Pipes* and *The Chicago Reel*. Joe's set of challenging banjo reels ends with a spirited version of *The Mason's Apron*. In between are two slower tracks: *Oliver Goldsmith's Lament* achingly articulated on the pipes, and a sax medley of O'Carolan tunes including at least one of the beautiful *Bridget*

Cruise airs.

Pete Waters reminds me strongly of Lenny Henry's description of the Irish as "white Jamaicans" - he trips from a totally convincing pub-band rendition of *Whisky in the Jar* to his own rough 'n' ready Reggae philosophy *Slip On By*. A couple of tracks later, he's back on the porter for the classic Irish *Night Visiting Song*, then it's over to urban blues for *Love In Our Hearts*, another of Pete's own compositions.

The final eleven-minute set starts with *The May Morning Dew*, a perfect vehicle for pipes and voice. The gripping atmosphere is a testament to John's skill as a producer, as well as the piping and singing, plus subtle but imaginative synth and programming. This track stands as tall as any version I've heard, sending shivers down the spine, reminding us of the tragedy which inspired the lament. The set of tunes which completes this track builds gradually into a full Irish session with fiddle and bodhrán, a rousing end to a most interesting CD.

© Alex Monaghan

The Moonzie Allstars "Hypnagogic" Skelpaig Music, 2011

I'm assuming there's a wee place in the Kingdom of Fife called Moonzie, where these guys get together. Seems reasonable, given what I know of Fife. This would also

www.moonzieallstars.com

explain the slightly unstable mix of mirth and music on *Hypnagogic*: a whiff or two of the old lino factory, a nostalgic hankering after Lochgelly days, or perhaps an ill-advised dip in the murky waters around Elie? Whatever the cause, this CD positively radiates long-haired joyful abandon: a mixture of Ska, Reggae, Ceilidh, Soca, Cajun and Craic. In short, party music with a Scottish edge - a sort of acoustic Keltik Elektrik.

Seven instrumental tracks, all eminently danceable, are led by Dave Adam on pipes and whistles. Tunes range from traditional Irish and Finnish standards to modern compositions by Gordon Duncan, Diarmaid Moynihan, Basque box-player Kepa Junkera and members of the band. Johnny Beaver (may not be his real name) puts solid African and Caribbean rhythms behind most tracks, following in the footsteps of Davie Cattenach. Graham Dickson and Geoff Stevenson fill in the gaps on guitars, bass, keys and stuff, with Geoff taking lead vocals on the five songs. I'll just give you the song titles - I'm sure you can deduce the style easily enough. *Hey Mr Bongo*, *La Vie est Courte*, *Let's Go Crazy*, *Liberio el Libido* and *Acros the Sound*: that last one is a bit less obvious, it's about island life and ferries and the West Highland idyll.

The Moonzie Allstars are a lot of fun, their musicianship is impressive and I'm sure they can kick start any Scottish celebration. With a very broad appeal, *Hypnagogic* ranges from Old Rope String Band territory to more serious ethnic fusions like Macumba and Salsa Celtica. This CD would be great at a party, on a car journey, on the beach, or just to annoy the people in the flat downstairs. The live act is probably even better. I've seen rave reviews of gigs in Letham and Brechin, so the band is obviously touring widely. www.moonzieallstars.com should have more information - I'm almost afraid to look.

© Alex Monaghan

Caladh Nua "Next Stop" Own Label, 2011

On their second album, this young Irish band from the Midlands and County Waterford



continues to impress with their beguiling mix of tunes and songs. There's an easy familiarity to their five-piece arrangements, and a gentle beauty in the singing: Caladh

www.caladhnuua.com

Nua may not blow your socks off, but they will warm your souls and set your toes tapping. As far as I can tell, the line-up is unchanged from their *Happy Days* debut release: Derek Morrissey on B/C box, Colm O'Caoimh and Eoin O'Meachair on guitar and banjo, and the twin fiddles of Paddy Tutty and Lisa Butler who also provides lead vocals.

Lisa's four songs are an even split between English and Irish, and all cover the popular Celtic theme of doomed love. The first was written by her brother Eric, and reminds me of the best side of John Spillane: a sweet and simple tune, direct poignant lyrics, and the occasional rhythmic twist. Lisa's voice is clear, strong enough, and perfectly in key, with just a touch of smokiness to express the pain and grief in her chosen material. *Mheall Sí Lena Glórthaí Mé* and *Fuigfidh Mé* are both classics of the Gaelic song tradition, handled very sympathetically here with sparse arrangements and a very open narrative delivery. Every singer is different, but I find Lisa puts me in mind of Fiona Kelleher: her tone is unusually warm and engaging.

The eight instrumental tracks reinforce this impression of warmth and welcome. Caladh Nua have chosen mostly traditional pieces, but they have ventured far off the beaten track to find them: *Three Deer and a Hare*, *The Long and Slender Sally* and *Moving in Decency* are all new names to me. They've also harvested a fine crop of recent compositions by the likes of Sean Ryan, Billy McComiskey, Shetland pianist Ronnie Cooper, Tipperary composer Denis Carey, and even the father of bluegrass Bill Monroe. There's only one Caladh Nua original here: *Trip to Brussels* by Colm, a gentle lilting jig which leads nicely into *Give us a Drink of Water* to end the album. This final track serves as well as any to illustrate the sparkling close collaboration between box and banjo, fiddles and guitar, which gives Caladh Nua's music a life of its own. Special mention goes to the sublime slow reel *Granny in the Corner*, a gem of a tune taken at the perfect tempo. These youngsters have formed an exceptional unit, and developed an individual style which is slightly understated but deeply satisfying. Caladh Nua have confidently taken their next step with this CD, and *Next Stop* should be high on the "most wanted" lists for 2011.

© Alex Monaghan

Session A9 "One for the Road"

Raj Records, 2010

Resembling a double-booking for a Reservoir Dogs reunion and a Sean Connery lookalike contest, these seven Scottish samurai pack four fiddles, mandolin, keyboards, percussion, guitar and vocals. Most of their material was written by fiddlers Charlie Kerron, Adam Sutherland and Kevin Henderson, and much of the rest has only been around for a generation or so, but it's all very much in the Scottish traditional idiom, at least as exemplified by the fiddle-based session scene in Glasgow and the highlands. This is fiddle music with the fingerless gloves off, wild and predatory, strong and supple, reared on cold porridge and illicit whisky, the real McCoy.

www.sessionA9.com

Not to be confused with *The Real McKay Wedding*, a driving Kerron composition which opens this album: Session A9 start as they mean to continue, with a thoroughly modern Scottish reel which shows the blend of rhythmic ingenuity and catchy melody characteristic of their music. Brian McAlpine and Chimp Robertson work their magic in the back line (if only I was writing about Scottish rugby!) while the cat-gut choir sings its heart out. Willie Ross's piping classic *Struy Lodge* sneaks in between two of Charlie's tunes, but compositions from before Bob Geldof are definitely in the minority here.

Reels, jigs, strathspeys: that's the staple diet of Session A9. Guitarist Marc Clements sings a

John Martyn song, and there's a delightful slow air from Mr Kerron. Otherwise, the tempo only fluctuates between high and very high. There are plenty of great tunes here: *Paella Grande*, *The Rabbit*, *Pressed for Time*, *The Rizla*, *Trip to Austin*, *Matt's Favourite* and more. The lads finish with two tremendous traditional tunes, *Sporting Paddy* and *Hamish the Carpenter*, topped of by *Hull's Reel* from the late John Morris Rankin, and finally Adam Sutherland's prodigious *Road to Errogie*. For full-on fiddle fever, Session A9 is hard to beat, and this live recording shows them at their best.

© Alex Monaghan

Spontus "Spontus" Own Label, 2010

Whatever this is, it's a very good example. I can tell you it's Breton music, but probably not as you know it. Based around Lannion, Spontus have been playing for dancers all over Brittany for over a decade. They have moved from the traditional repetitive melodies of Fes Noz music towards something much more complex and contemporary. The essentials of Breton dance music are still present, but like a good Breton tarte there are many layers of flavour before you reach the traditional base.

www.spontus.fr

Back in the late seventies and early eighties, there was a movement in the Central French "bal folk" scene to incorporate modern instruments, influences from jazz and rock, even Celtic and Balkan music. The same thing happened elsewhere, including the traditional heartland of Ireland. In Brittany this produced bands such as Bleizi Ruz, Ti-Jaz, and of course the experimentation of Stivell. In some ways, Spontus is a return to these ideas. In other respects, theirs is a completely new approach to Breton dance music. The fiddle and accordeon mimic the bombarde and biniou dialogue of traditional Breton groups, while the bass and guitar (electric or not) provide the crucial beat and lift for dancing. This recording works equally well for listeners or dancers.

The peculiarity of Spontus, and the reason I'm reluctant to categorise them beyond Breton, is in their melodies and chord structures. At times the underlying traditional melodies emerge almost unmarked: *An Dro* and *Gavotte Tamm Diwezhan*, for instance. Other tracks accentuate the modalities and minor cadences of traditional music, disguising the melody so as to make it almost unrecognisable: the titles of *Louloudéac* and *Ridécallées* give it away. Finally, there are places where it seems the Penguin Café Orchestra has gatecrashed a Bagad Kemper concert and added hypno-classical loops to the familiar rhythms of Breton dances: listen to *Wanig*, *Indécis'8* or *Les Hirondelles*. It's all good, mostly very good, but don't ask me what it is.

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India Alba "High Beyond" Own Label, 2011

Two Scots and two Indians meet in the Himalayas, and decide to record an album together. Beats clearing up all the coke cans. Actually, this is their second album, and the mix of sounds works extremely well. There are a few clichés - the tabla cantaireachd, Gordon Duncan's most Eastern composition *The Bellydancer* (but not Niall Kenny's *Trip to Pakistan* - presumably the border was closed). There are also plenty of surprises, including *Lucy Farr's Barndance*


www.indiaalba.com

transported from Galway to Gujranwala. The arrangements focus on either the swooping Indian fiddle of Sharat Chandra Srivastava or the pipes and whistles of Ross Ainslie, with cittern guru Nigel Richard and percussion yogi Gyan Singh weaving in and out behind the melody. There's a lot of technical detail about Indian music forms in the notes - rags, gats, alaps and the like - which is beyond me: for all I know, they could be making it up.

Most of *High Beyond* was composed by the band. The only exception I haven't mentioned is Donald MacLeod's retreat march *The Black Isle* played super slow by Ross on low whistle. The opening *Himalayan Hideaway* is an Ainslie original, and is followed by a group composition for the Swiss Hang (a type of steel drum) before another of Ross's tunes in modern Celtic mood. *Highland Dream* is by the Indian half of the band, a fiddle and tabla showpiece in 4/4. *The Bellydancer* is obviously a little unfamiliar to Singh and Srivastava, but very hypnotic on Ross's pipes. The almost equally sinuous *Lesley Shaw's* by Richard makes me wonder what he knows about India Alba's young Glasgow agent that I don't. *Essaouira* is another of Nigel's, with a definite North Indian vibe, so maybe it's just his style. After the solidly Scottish slow air and clearly Irish barndance, *High Beyond* ends with a fifteen minute combination of Indian forms and Western influences, a challenging piece worth listening through. India Alba may have met at a musical crossroads, and seem to have found a common path: I'm interested to see where it will lead after this.

© Alex Monaghan

Brock McGuire Band "Green Grass Blue Grass" Paulman Music, 2011

 Led by Paul Brock (button box) and Manus McGuire (fiddle), with Enda Scahill on banjo and Denis Carey on piano, this band has been around for about a decade. Their first album was a doozie, classic Irish music mixed with Canadian influences. Album number two sees Brock McGuire heading south, teaming up with Nashville's finest in the shape of Ricky Skaggs, Aubrey Haynie, Brian Sutton, Jeff Taylor and Mark Tain, to produce a down-home blend of Irish and American styles. This is a true blend, the different elements intermingling and complementing each other, although there is a track or two where the Newgrass intro doesn't really fit the pure-drop tunes.

www.brockmcguireband.com

Seeing as how this band grew out of the Moving Cloud céilí band, an earlier Brock-McGuire collaboration, it's appropriate to start with Neillie Boyle's great *Moving Cloud* reel. There's a slight jarring as the clawhammer banjo introduces *Tom Ward's Downfall* and *Lucy Campbell*, but these guys are smooth enough to carry it off, and the combination of green and blue is seamless on *Indian Springs*. The two-step *Wild Fiddler's Rag* harks back to the heydays of Kimmel and Derrane - not over yet, of course - while *Because It's There* combines string band and showband in a string of scintillating turquoise solos.

Despite the acknowledged vocal talents of a couple of their Americam guests, Brock McGuire keep this recording firmly instrumental. The beautiful old-time fiddle cadences of *Chinquapin Hunting* are followed by a banjo showpiece from Enda. There's a lovely piano air by Denis dedicated to Paul's wife *Aineis*, a French Canadian romp, and then a run of Scottish tunes: *The Bluebell Polka*, *The Braes of Marr*, *Cock o' the North* (which probably goes by another name in the US), and a couple of old American favourites. The finish of this CD isn't as strong as the start, but there's plenty of good music to be had right up to the end: another very pretty air *Taylor's Joy* by Manus McGuire, and the final medley ending with the deservedly popular *Miss Monaghan* (no relation). More information is available online at www.brockmcguireband.com, but no samples so far: you'll have to look elsewhere for those.

© Alex Monaghan

Hugh Marwick & Stuart Mackintosh

"The Grit that Makes the Pearl"

Own label, 2011

From the Edinburgh musical family, Hugh Marwick was a teenage whistle prodigy with the Spootiskerry Ceilidh Band in the eighties and has

www.marwickandmackintosh.com

been in various bands since. He's joined here by accordionist Stuart Mackintosh, and several tracks on their debut album also feature Hugh's brother Gavin on fiddle, Ewan Hemingway on keyboards, Sean Cousins on percussion, and piper Callum MacGillivray. There's quite a big sound for a duo album, but Hugh and Stuart can reasonably claim this CD as their own, not least because it's mostly their own compositions in the Scottish traditional style, with a smattering of great tunes old and new from other sources.

The Scottish whistle tradition is rather different from the flowing Irish style. Heavily influenced by the highland pipes, and by playing for dancers, there's a rhythmic percussive quality which Hugh uses to great effect. Grace notes abound, triplets are tongued not rolled, and the whole experience is much more full-on. Starting with Hugh's composition *The Scaffold*, the diminutive whistle holds its own against the mighty accordion through jigs, reels, marches and strathspeys, man. Many of these tunes stick to the nine-note scale of the pipes: *The Pig in the Bracken*, a catchy wee jig, and the reel *Elyn Marwick* are both by Hugh, and would both transpose from the whistle to the pipes with no problems. In other tunes the piping influence is more subtle: the key of A is a favourite, with the whistle stretching up to top C# for *The Wild West Ceilidh Band* - one of Stuart's tunes.

There is a more wistful side to this pair, and even an occasional switch to low whistle, although Hugh isn't afraid to tackle slow airs such as *Return from Stac* on the high D: this gorgeous melody takes only eight of those nine notes. True pipe tunes are here too: *Zito the Bubbleman* by the late Gordon Duncan, and a monster set of reels which starts with two by Allan MacDonald and finishes with Ross Ainslie's *Dirty Bee*. Callum MacGillivray's pipes provide a superb counterpoint to the whistle, very different dynamics but the same punchy style. For some reason the lads don't play the third part of *Rip the Calico* here: maybe they didn't want to stress what is one of only two traditional tunes on this album.

Stuart and Hugh's repertoire is varied enough to fill a whole recording - Stuart's compositions *Sin Aged E* and *Zandra's Waltz* have a funky streak which combines well with his West Coast Gaelic box style. The title track is another fine example of the breadth to be enjoyed here: starting in lounge Latin mood, it swaggers boldly to the bar and knocks back a couple of tequilas before breaking into a pair of stomping ceilidh reels. With this wealth of instrumental material, it's almost gilding the lily to add a couple of songs from Eilidh Mackenzie: but Hugh and Stuart do exactly that, two gentle traditional Gaelic favourites accompanied discreetly by The Gritters. As the title suggests, there are enough rough edges here to keep things interesting, but it all adds up to a quality result. Samples and contact details are available at www.marwickandmackintosh.com - worth checking out.

© Alex Monaghan

Habadekuk "Hopsadaddy"

Gofolk, 2011



This Danish instrumental group is one of a very select few worldwide who approach the brilliance, boisterousness,

www.habadekuk.dk

breadth of appeal and sheer bonhomie of the famous Quebec band La Bottine Souriante. Their combination of sparkling accordion and fiddle, blaring horn section, and solid rhythms on bass and drums, brings the best of world music eclecticism to boost the Danish dance music tradition. There's quite a lot of shared repertoire and style with upbeat English music too: Blowzabella, The Oyster Band, and Urban Folk Quartet spring to mind. Kicking off with a couple of lively polkas - rants or reels from an English perspective - this nine-piece ensemble creates a wall of sound which is equally impressive for listeners and dancers. In more relaxed mood, the well-known waltz-style *Viggo Post* is gorgeously played: there's a baroque splendour to the melody line, a quality of tone which shows the exceptional calibre of these musicians.

Kingo & Hans Jensen has a thumping stateside rock beat behind more polkas, and this continues through *Hornpiben* (a schottische, confusingly enough). Another gentle track brings us to the samba beats and extravagant solos of *Polkason*, great fun for a full six minutes. Habadekuk take their name from a catchy tune found in a remote Jutland parish tunebook, and here it is paired with another old Jutland tune from the island of Farø. The penultimate track on *Hopsadaddy* is one of the funkiest waltzes I've ever heard, up there with Sandy Brechin and Aly Bain for pure panache. It's followed by three hopsas, Germanic festival music combined with jazz and cheeky brass for a really big carnival-style finish. Habadekuk boast some well-known names and a few prizes in the last few years, and this is their first recording so let's hope there's plenty more to come from this exceptionally brilliant bunch.

© Alex Monaghan

Anna-Wendy Stevenson "My Edinburgh" Own Label, 2011

I like this CD a lot. I'm probably biased, having lived in Edinburgh for ten years, and knowing several of the musical characters involved, but I do feel that this music captures some

www.anna-wendy.com

of the best aspects of Edinburgh's spirit across all types of music. Anna-Wendy is well placed to do this, spanning classical and traditional music as well as other genres: on *My Edinburgh* she combines the unmistakable Edinburgh mix of folk and fun jazz with some more serious sounds. She's also had the brilliant original idea of setting words to her nine compositions, and then repeating the whole set without words, so you can choose whether to start at track 1 or track 11. (Track 10 is kind of in between.)

Each of these nine new pieces describes people or places from an Edinburgh which is instantly recognisable - at least to me! Anna-Wendy could well have taken the album title from this wonderful phrase in her press release: "my musical life in pubs", a fitting headline for the CVs of several participants in this production. *My Edinburgh* leads with the exuberant *Fred Thomson's Reel*, with Luke Plumb on mandolin and Fraser Fifield on sax, recreating the mood of such great Edinburgh musicians as The Easy Club, Shooglenifty, Simon Thoumire, and even Salsa Celtica. The gentler ebb and flow of *Newhaven Sunset* suits Colin MacLennan's evocative words, the sun sinking into the Forth through a miasma of mist and murk, kindling green and purple fire from the sky. The story behind *Burke & Hare* is well known, and chillingly played out, with Anna-Wendy's fiddle joined by a large string section and some atmospheric percussion: there is a pub of the same name, but I don't think that's what she had in mind.

Grove Street and *Edinburgh Nights* lean more towards the classical genre, albeit with a jazzy modern edge. *New Town* is a glorious tune which is already appearing in sessions, and the gently weaving *Audrey's Jig* sums up its subject succinctly. *Calton Hill* sits between folk and fortepiano, the ensemble playing a little too staid for my taste. The grandeur of the final track is impressive, arraying a well known Scottish melody in all the majesty of an Edinburgh panorama. The words are interesting too - ranging from geological observations to poetic

musings, including some from Anna-Wendy's best known ancestor. *My Edinburgh* makes a fine hour's entertainment in its entirety - 78 minutes and 60 seconds, apparently - but is also great to dip into for occasional tracks.

© Alex Monaghan

Anna-Wendy Stevenson "My Edinburgh" Own label, 2011

Edinburgh's fiddler Anna-Wendy Stevenson has been commissioned in 2006 by Glasgow's Celtic Connections Festival to compose a musical piece for strings, percussion, piano and saxophone. Following the enthusiastic reviews of the event she recorded her series of musical postcards from her hometown with members of Robert McFall's Chamber Orchestra, Mairi Campbell on viola, Fraser Fifield on sax, Luke Plumb on mandolin and bouzouki, Fos Patterson on piano, Donald Hay on percussion and the voices of Freddie Thomson, Dave Francis, Audrey and Colin MacLennan.

www.anna-wendy.com

Dave Francis cites an excerpt of Robert Fergusson's poetry followed by the lively "Fred Thomson's reel" before Colin MacLennan remembers the "Newhaven Sunset" he used to watch in his childhood and Stevenson brings it to a beautiful piece of chamber music. But the postcards not only show the beauty of Scotland's capital, Francis tells as well the story of "Burke and Hare", two serial murderers of the 19th century, and Fifield improvises to the dramatic string arrangements. The vibrant "Edinburgh Nights" inspired Stevenson to write an orchestral firework of strings. Audrey MacLennan, a regular session player at Sandy Bell's, and Thomson, who is hosting the sessions since the 1960s, tell about all those musical highlights during the sessions accompanied by the moderate "Audrey's jig". Finally the volcanic rock of "Arthur's Seat" delivers a beautiful view of the city's panorama brought to music by Stevenson with a lyrical $\frac{3}{4}$ melody accompanied by a majestic march rhythm.

The CD presents first the entire work, her lyrical music with the epic prose, and then the listener can enjoy the musical artwork without voices. An impressive production performed by first class musicians.

© Adolf „gorhand“ Goriup

The MacDonald Sisters "Sòlas Clann Dhòmhnaill" PoppyDisc/Rev-Ola, 2010

The MacDonald Sisters were the first Gaelic singing group in Scotland. Founded in 1963 they were extensively touring the British Isles until 1977. Finlay MacDonald, son of Kathleen, presents a compilation with 26 of their most beautiful songs.

The first 12 songs were taken from their album "Four Bonnie Highland Lassies". They sing traditional rhythmic Gaelic songs like "Horo Bhodachain", melancholic slow waltzes like "Calum Sgàire" as well as some intoxicating mouth music (Puir a beul). Their beautiful singing is accompanied by orchestral arrangements by Colin Wylie and Archie Duncan. They also perform classic folk songs in English like "The Spinning Wheel", another beautiful slow waltz, or the rhythmic "Johnny Cope".

All vocal arrangements for the 14 songs on "Songs of the Island" were by Kathleen and the accompaniment directed by Iain Gourley. The exclusively Gaelic songs are traditional except

one of the Waulking songs, "Is guirme do shuil", and the soft melancholic ballad "An Ataireachd Bhuan", which are original songs by The MacDonald Sisters.

The four brilliant singers introduced their Gaelic heritage to the audience in the 60ies and 70ies and thus are trailblazers for modern Scottish folk music. Their authentic singing style is accompanied by rather classical arrangements, an interesting and beautiful historical source.

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Sattuma "Kinofilmi" Sketis Music, 2010

Sattuma is a Russian family band from the Karelian area featuring Arto Rinne (vocals, bouzouki, mandolin, guitar, accordion, kantele, blues harp, percussion) with his daughter Eila (violin, vocals) and Dmitry Demin (flutes, clarinet, soprano saxophone and other wind instruments) with his son Vladislav (Violin). Together with bassists Andrey Habonen and Artem Undalov, drummer Petr Vasilyev and Sami singer Emmi Kuittinen they recorded their latest album "Kinofilmi".

heninen.net/sattuma/

Arto wrote "Soutelemma Joutelemma" (we leisurely row), a beautiful song in a moderate pace show casing Emmi's breathtaking Yoik singing, fine mandolin and flute playing and the mesmerizing sound of the kantele. Dmitry opens Lada Demina's melancholic ballad "Koca" (braid) with an ancient wooden shepherd horn before Eila starts singing with a clear soprano voice, guitar, flute, bass and violin play the minstrels. The intoxicating polka "Pikajuna Petroskoi-Joensuu" (express train Petrozavodsk-Joensuu) is performed with violins, accordion, flute, blues-harp, bass and drums and "Ruocinsuari" (Ruochi island) is a playful slow waltz; both instrumentals written by Arto. My favourite is "Varausloitsu", a dramatic protection spell against the evil spirits of the Lapland magicians. Arto put Miihkali Perttunen's lyrics to music using the ancient Finnish bowed lyre jouhikko, kantele, bull-roarer, Jew's harp, shaman's drum and wow-wow bass, a terrific sound. Vladislav composed the music to Vyacheslav Agapitov's Russian poem "Country Boy" and it turned out as a rhythmic folk song performed on bouzouki, violin, bagpipe, cajon, bass and flute. "Kulkijapoika" is a traditional song from Finland and Arto arranged it as a 'North Karelian gypsy humppa' with accordion, violins, clarinet and rhythm section.

The new album of Sattuma is a brilliant collection of songs and tunes from their homeland and bordering Finnish and Russian regions. Great musicians, fine composing and wonderful singing bring you to North-West Russia, enjoy the Russian soul.

© Adolf „gorhand“ Goriup

77 El Deora "The Crown & the Crow's Confession"

Western Independent Recording 2010

Songwriter Maurice Tani (vocals, guitar) and singer Jenn Courtney front the Californian based 5 piece line up 77 El Deora, featuring Mike Anderson (bass), Christopher Fisher (drums) and Steve Kallai (fiddle). Together with a bunch of great guest musicians they have recorded 12 mostly self-crafted tracks for their fourth album "The Crown & the Crow's Confession".

www.77eldeora.com

They start off with a lively Country, JB Allison's twangy pedal-steel and a great duet by Jenn

and Maurice on "I just dodged a Bullet". Following up Jenn sings the Blues on "Push me away", her passionate singing is accompanied by Jim Pugh on piano, Joey Hinson on organ and the bands shuffling rhythm. "Rain" is a dramatic song showcasing again Jenn's brilliant singing floating on the andante rhythm of the band and Mark Maberley's fine additional orchestration. Then Jenn's hauntingly beautiful voice is "Dancing with Devils", a soulful guitar ballad accompanied by fine harmonies on fiddle and Steve Stanley's awesome flugelhorn playing. The only cover is Bruce Springsteen's romantic ballad "County Fair", Jenn and Maurice singing together a virtuoso a Capella duet. The final bonus track "Cowboy" is a lovely instrumental tune with piano and fiddle creating a wonderful melodic sound and the guitar adds an amazing solo.

Tani is an accomplished songwriter, the arrangements are perfect and vocal as well as instrumental performances are outstanding. A superb Americana album.

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Janet Dowd "300 Miles"

Blue Cow Records, 2009

Northern Ireland's folk singer Janet Dowd (vocals, autoharp) has recorded her debut solo album with a bunch of great guest musicians including her husband Mervyn on drums, percussion and slide guitar. She sings 6 traditional and 6 covered songs from Ireland, Scotland and America.

www.janetdowd.com

Brendan Goff plays the piano on the melancholic Irish ballad "Dingle Bay", violin, electric bass, cello, banjo and accordion join in and Janet mesmerizes with her hauntingly beautiful singing. William Garrett plays lowland pipes and low whistle on the traditional "Both Sides of the Tweed" and Jonathan Toman on guitar and David Lyttle on cello accompany "John Condon" (R. Laird/S.Starrett), a tender ballad for an Irish hero. Irish songwriter Jimmy MacCarthy wrote "Sky Road" and Janet mesmerizes the romantic song with her crystal clear voice. Scotland's John Douglas from the Trashcan Sinatras composed "Wilde Mountainside", another romantic ballad showcasing Paula Rafferty's fine fiddling, and "Dimming of the Day" from American guitar player Richard Thompson adds with autoharp, slide guitar and Hammond a touch of Americana to the programme. My favourite song is the classic American traditional "Wayfaring Stranger". Soulful singing, banjo and mandolin play Bluegrass and John Giffin made the arrangements for his saxophone and Rachel Toman's clarinet; an intoxicating version.

Unfortunately Janet Dowd mainly sings soft ballads and songs, she also has a brilliant Blues timbre and her excellent performance on the only rhythmic track makes you lust for more.

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Blues Dragon "Blues Dragon"

Bad Blues Music, 2009

Blues Dragon are a six piece line-up from South Florida featuring Mark Telesca (vocals, bass), Mike "Big Dog" Hundley (guitars, samples), Tony "The Reverend" Monaco (keyboards, vocals), John Boyle (harmonica, alto sax, flute, vocals), Fred Weng (drums, percussion, trumpet) and Rico Geragi (congas, bongos, electric percussions, vocals). They have recorded 12 original and covered songs for their self-titled debut album.

www.bluesdragon.com

Telesca has a great voice and with his passionate singing and pulsating bass he rocks the "Electric Chair", awesome harmonica, Hammond B3, guitar and brass playing accompany this intoxicating Blues rock. Hundley showcases his virtuoso guitar playing on "I got the Blues for you" and Geragi adds some breathtaking percussion rhythm. One of my favourites is "This train", a breathtaking southern Blues with a jazzy intermezzo featuring piano, harmonica and guitar solos. "Don't get me wrong" stands out with a souly groove and terrific playing together of Boyle on flute and Monaco on Hammond B3. Another highlight is "I just want you to understand", a brilliant Slow Blues boosting the pace and finishing up as a jazzy Blues rock with Weng and Geragi creating an unbelievable rhythm. The CD ends with "Livin' on Death Row", an epic and eerie song with Pat Monaco and Lyndsey Brown on violins. The debut of the Blues Dragon is an accomplished Blues album. They are first class musicians and singers and their music is somewhere between Blood, Sweat & Tears, Led Zeppelin and Santana. If you like decent Blues rock, visit them at www.bluesdragon.com!

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Chris MacLean "Feet Be Still"

Own label, 2009

Singer/Songwriter Chris MacLean from Quebec has published her second album „Feet be still“ with ten original songs and two traditionals. Producer Ian Tamblyn and a bunch of great musicians accompanied create the excellent musical background.

www.chrismaclean.com

Chris sings of the beautiful rural country life on the vivid "The Map inside", Oliver Fairfield on drums and Stuart Watkins on bass create the pace and Fred Guignon plays electric guitar and lap steel. The title track, a rhythmic Americana, is driven by Oliver's djembe and Fred changes to Dobro. The songs were written between 2004 and 2009, incidentally my three favorites date back to 2007. Starting off with the jazzy social-critic "Snow" recorded as a trio with vocals, acoustic guitar, electric bass and drums. The first composition is from 2004, "Song for Tibet", and presents Ian on bowls and hammered dulcimer and on the ironic Country song "A dog named Money" Don Cummings adds his bluesy organ playing. Then Chris sings the breathtaking "Sisters of Charity", an epic folk song brought forward by her on dulcimer, root drum and vocals and James Stephens on fiddles, fretless bass, percussion and backing vocals, my personal nr. 1. Finally she gives an awesome performance on "Naysayer's Redemption"; her rhythmic singing is accompanied by the finest soul-rock. Another highlight is the American traditional "Wayfaring Stranger" with James on fiddle, mandolin and bass. "Feet be still" is a wonderful collection of songs, recorded by first-class musicians and with a hauntingly beautiful voice.

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