



by Dede Williams

Photo: Steven Parry Donald

North Sea Gas

Forty Years of Good Road

One of Scotland's oldest and still thriving bands celebrates its anniversary late

What if you planned a 40th birthday blast but had to cancel because it seemed certain no one would come? If you were one of Scotland's oldest but still vibrant bands with 12 silver and two gold disc awards and concerts that are almost always sold out, you wouldn't brood that you weren't more popular. You'd be in a lockdown.

Under different circumstances, on Valentine's Day 2021, the

auspicious date of its founding in 1981, North Sea Gas, just NSG or "the Gas", would have been popping corks and preparing for upcoming performances at concerts and festivals across Scotland, Germany or North America. Pre-pandemic, the three toured for much of the year.

Though they'd rather have been playing for live audiences, throughout the hiatus they kept

the spirit going and the music flowing while waiting to return to the road. Ronnie MacDonald (known to most as NSG fans as Mac) and fiddler Grant Simpson were highly visible on the Quarantine Gigs online concerts started by Grant. Dave Gilfillan, who co-founded the band in 1981, kept busy updating the group's website and the new Official North Sea Gas YouTube channel.

Normally, 2021 would have seen the launch of a 10- or 12-track studio album with new songs, but how can you make a CD when you can't leave the house? Musicians who travel a lot are too restless to bide their time and drink tea. When the rules allowed, the three were back in the studio. As rehearsing had been impossible during the prolonged break, they decided to produce a triple-disc

anniversary album from titles on the band's first 21 recordings. Appropriately, the CD, as well as a two-part video on the website, is called *A Long Road*. "It's not North Sea Gas greatest hits," Dave remarks, but "more of a reflective look at what we were doing as we travelled, recorded and the line-up changed over the years".

A touch of irony is hidden in the new album's name. The 2017 CD was called *Rolling Home*, the one that followed in 2019, *Hearth And Homeland*. The latter title seemed prescient, as a few months after its release, the pandemic saw the band literally stuck at home. With the easing of COVID restrictions in November 2021, they seized the chance to take the new recording on the road, to Germany. Despite fears that the tour might be cancelled, everything went to plan. Barring any unforeseeable circumstances, the three from NSG will be back on the road in America again in May.

Forty years of good road

To date, NSG has recorded 270 songs and 70 Scottish and Irish tunes, most of them in three-part harmonies. At the start, the focus was clearly on traditional songs and fiddle-driven instrumentals, but recent CDs have featured contemporary songs in the folk genre from singer-songwriters such as Scotland's Karine Polwart, Gordon Menzies or Andy M. Stewart, along with England's Richard Thompson and Northern Ireland's Tommy Sands. Often there will be a song written by Dave and one of Grant's quirky American ditties. Sometimes there's a surprise. Who knew that *Hector The Hero* had lyrics?

Along the long road well travelled, 11 different musicians – only one, fiddler Kirsty McLean, being female – have entertained audiences under the distinctive banner with Scotland's Lion Rampant dancing in the flames. The current line-up has been very stable. Dave and Mac have played together for 20 years, and Grant has been on board for 14, after trading his chemistry studies for a troubadour's life. Apart from the fiddle, between them the three play guitar, bouzouki, banjo, bodhrán, whistle and harmonica.

Each member contributes his own unique skills and personality. While Edinburgh native Dave's first and only musical direction was traditional, Mac, who calls Port Seton his hometown, cut his teeth in another genre, playing in his first rock band at 17. In the 1980s, he switched his allegiance to folk, joining Davy Steele in the duo called Auldhammer – a play on the name of a German sea captain who once came ashore near Prestonpans. During his Australia years, Mac and his brother Stuart founded the band Celtic City Sons to stay in touch with their Scottish roots.

Grant, who grew up in Lossiemouth, has been making music "most of my life". At age six, he got the chance to learn violin at school, but it was a local folk festival five years later that lit the spark for this music. In only a short time, he was a regular at local folk clubs and festivals. Moving to Edinburgh, where folk music is always on tap, was a "bit of a revelation", he says. Grant quickly became part of it all, pulling pints behind the bar and playing sessions at the Royal Oak, where he met Dave and Mac.

For Dave, starting his own band was a long-held dream. "I fell in love with Scottish folk music at the age of 14 or 15," he says. "When most of my age group were hung up on rock and punk, I followed folk scene names like The Cotters, The Corries, Hamish Imlach and Archie Fisher. By the time I was 20, I had managed to meet and occasionally perform with some of them."

At age 16, he was playing back-up guitar at occasional shows for Matt McGinn, whom he remembers as "a talented man who never sang a song in the same key twice." When Archie played the local Craigmillar County Cinema, Dave and his friend Jim Nicholl, calling themselves The Moorfoots, busked for the queue forming outside. "Later, we saw the show."

Seeing The Corries play the Odeon Cinema and the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh was "a life changer." Though traditional Scottish folk had always been his passion, "how The Corries presented it and the way the audience reacted to them



was unlike anything I had ever experienced." Immersing himself in their repertoire would reward him.

After work on the future site of the Radio Forth Studios, Dave – who had trained as a joiner in case a folk-singing career wasn't in the stars – often walked the few blocks to a tiny hole-in-the-wall pub in Broughton Street, where guitars were passed around to anyone bold enough to play and sing. On the day of an early 1970s holiday break-up, he and his workmates popped into the pub for a beer. Someone handed him a guitar. "I pushed aside the glass and belted out *Flower Of Scotland*, putting all I had into it," he remembers. Turning to pass the guitar, he spotted Roy Williamson at the next table. The much-admired Corries singer and author of the song "gave me a nod and a smile."

A new folk band is born

A decade later, as North Sea Gas was just making its mark, Dave won a nod and a piece of business advice from another Corrie. After a concert in Edinburgh, he struck up a conversation with Ronnie Browne, who told him the secret to financial success: bums on seats. "If your name is selling the tickets, make sure you get a percentage of the take."

The band that soon would be called North Sea Gas got its start in the old White Hart Inn in Edinburgh's Grassmarket, where Dave and Peter Farrell had begun playing a regular weekly gig. Sometimes Colin McKenzie joined them on mandolin, and the talk turned

to forming a trio. Not keen on travelling or Dave's concept of "good entertaining folk music with rousing choruses for audiences to join in on," Pete jumped off the bandwagon. Colin jumped on with Dave and brought along a friend, Wally Allan.

Before officially giving concerts, the formation needed a name. One under consideration was Brewer's Droop. "Some will probably think it's just as well this didn't make the cut," Dave laughs. The (North Sea) 'Gas' label we eventually picked was really just about having fun, but a lot of people didn't get it."

For a nascent folk band seeking more exposure, serendipity sometimes helps turn the tide. With the White Hart's pub audiences growing, Jim Arbuthnott, a regular patron, asked why they didn't have an album for sale. Hearing that the cost was prohibitive for them, he offered to pay for it. Soon they were off to the studio. That first album, which was not only popular with the public but also sold well, was called *Those So Dearly Held*. The line from *Flower Of Scotland* was meant to express the focus on the folk tradition, Dave explains. The Roy Williamson song would not appear on a North Sea Gas album until 1989.

Gigs on gigs

As gas began to flow from fields off the Scottish coast, the name choice proved fortuitous. Companies like BP spared no expense to entertain crews after a day's work in wind and weather, and the band was booked for many gigs. Arriving

and departing by helicopter with instruments and equipment in tow could be scary when it was stormy. To celebrate the trillionth cubic foot of North Sea gas coming ashore in 1985, as a promotion BP released a floppy disc with the songs *North Sea Gas* and *Black Black Gold*, both titles penned by Dave. He still has the floppy.

Parallel to gigs on rigs, a name they never used for a CD but might have had fun with, the new band North Sea Gas was taking centre stage on a steadier platform. The then line-up of Dave and Colin McKenzie, with the addition of Colin Ramage a year after the start, drew crowds at the Edinburgh Caledonian hotel's famous Platform 1 bar through the 13 years they played there up to 1994.

Today, old folkies reminisce about good times there. On one YouTube video, a fan wrote, "This takes me back to Platform One at the Caley. It was a Friday night. As we walked in, Dave was belting out *Gallowa Hills* and the crowd was dancing on the tables or swinging from the lights. See North Sea Gas live if you can, always a good and rousing act."

Back on the road again

Though its roots remained firmly embedded in Scottish soil, North Sea Gas gradually began entertaining audiences beyond borders. The first gigs were for Scottish regiments in western Germany. After meeting Liz Holtmann in the Attic Folk

Club at RAF Gutersloh in the mid-1980s, the transition to the German folk circuit went smoothly. They were invited to play at the nearby Herford folk club she managed.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Gas gained new audiences in the former German Democratic Republic, getting a helping hand from folk enthusiasts such as Katja Stock and Jan Blumel, who brought them together with venues. Today, they play two annual tours in the region, organised by long-time tour coordinators Holger and Elke Zimmer. The end of the Cold War made touring the east easier, but three of the then-band members, fiddler Kirsty and her husband, bassist Bobby Miller, along with banjo and keyboard player Gerry McKenna, had work commitments in Scotland. Travelling and performing for audiences abroad was out of the question.

Dave was longing to get back on the road. A lucky coincidence, then, was Mac's return from Australia in late 2001 after 15 years down under. He had played with NSG briefly in 1983 before taking off and was eager to get back on the Scottish and European circuit. With a reorganised line-up, Dave, Mac and new recruit, Irish fiddler Tim O'Leary, hit the Autobahn.

USA, we're here to stay

While NSG had played in Canada, the US was still very

much a blank spot in 2002. Still pondering how to connect with venues there, Dave was surprised to find an email from Linda Zelenksi, who worked with the Blackstone River Theatre in Rhode Island, which focuses on Celtic/World music. Would the trio be interested in coming over for a tour? Indeed, yes, if someone would help set it up.

By chance, Linda had picked up a compilation CD of Scottish folk songs. NSG was the second track, "and I was blown away," she says. "I fast-forwarded through the disc to hear all their songs and also looked for their albums online." With none to be had from a US source, she found the band's website and ordered *Power Of Scotland* from Dave.

The next year, on the last leg of a musical journey through Canada, as a trial run the trio scheduled a southern detour into Massachusetts to play at Blackstone and fly back to Scotland from Boston. New England's February weather was not on their side, however. A snowstorm that Linda recalls "just wouldn't let up" led to the gig in her theatre being cancelled. Fortunately, it wasn't a bad omen, but "the beginning of a 20-year relationship," she says.

Since then, except for pandemic years 2020 and 2021, Linda has accompanied NSG on its US routes, which have taken them through the Northeast and points beyond. The band has been featured on numerous

radio and TV shows in the US and Canada and received proclamations from both Massachusetts and Rhode Island declaring "North Sea Gas Day" at different times over the years.

Fans and friends

On the long trek across continents, the Scottish musicians have played in venues from monasteries to castles as well as the oil rigs and have gained new fans and friends willing to help them find interesting places to perform. At a whisky tasting in the Harz Mountains of northeast Germany, Frank Wolf, who had just opened a bar, heard North Sea Gas play for the first time. Loving the rousing tunes as well as the traditional songs, he invited them to play in his southwest corner of Germany, the Palatinate region.

The first 'Irish Night' Frank hosted in 2005 wasn't the first in Germany to feature a Scottish band. At the time, the music of the green isle was much better known, and as Frank explained to Dave, calling it Irish would make it easier to sell tickets. That could well be a bonus, they agreed. The event has been so successful that it has been repeated every year, except in 2020 and 2021.

Fans that have become friends also host house concerts. Meeting the Scots in 2013, when they performed near her town in eastern Germany, Beate Krech asked if they would play a concert in her party cellar or garden, where up to 100 people can find room to clap and sing along. In return, on trips to Edinburgh she has often enjoyed an evening in their company at Sandy Bell's.

Music lovers sometimes close the circle between fans and friends virtually, then personally. On Facebook, Gloria Scott in Scotland became friends with Silke in Germany. Silke and her sister Gabriele, who call themselves the "Clapping Sisters", are regulars at NSG concerts in western Germany. When the pair were on a Scottish holiday in 2012, the three women surprised the band by showing up at a concert together. "They weren't even aware that we knew each other," says Gloria.

www.northseagas.co.uk



Mac, Grant & Dave: Photo: Courtesy of North Sea Gas

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