



CAPERCAILLIE

Sue Wilson assesses the impact of Scotland's original Gaelic revivalists

It's ironic that the two most commonly cited facts about Capercaillie are Sean Connery's declaration that Karen Matheson, the band's lead singer, has "a throat surely touched by the hand of God," and that they scored a UK Top 40 hit with a centuries-old song in Scottish Gaelic. Ironic, in that celebrity endorsements and pop-world success are about as far from Capercaillie's raison d'être as it's possible to imagine. If that weren't the case, the band might never have got off the ground. Back in the

early 80s, when its first founding members met at Oban high school, in the western Scottish Highlands, traditional music was a deeply unfashionable pursuit for any self-respecting teenager. It was at a session in the Mishnish Inn in Tobermory, during the 1983 Mull Music Festival, that the embryonic Capercaillie were first spotted, comprising accordionist and keyboard player Donald Shaw – still the band's anchorman today – Marc Duff on flute and whistles, fiddler Joan MacLachlan, guitarist Shaun Craig, and double bassist

Martin MacLeod. A local radio presenter heard them playing and immediately booked them for his show the following week, on condition that they came up with a name. Capercaillie – a large, rare and very beautiful Scottish bird – was chosen in part to symbolise a winning battle against extinction, with implicit reference to the traditional Highland music they played.

Further gigs followed, around the local village hall and festival circuit, and word of the band began to spread – all the quicker after Matheson joined the following year, adding that heavenly voice and a treasure trove of songs to their previously instrumental sound. A gold medal winner at the Royal National Mod, the Scottish Gaelic equivalent to Wales' Eisteddfod, Matheson learned to sing from her grandmother, Elizabeth MacNeill, one of many famed singers to hail from the island of Barra. In 1984, Capercaillie released their debut album, *Cascade*, a remarkably fresh and vibrant calling card which cemented their reputation as an exciting new arrival on the Scottish folk scene.

As the signature interplay between Matheson's singing and Shaw's atmospheric keyboard arrangements began to evolve, other key early developments included the arrival in 1985 of fiddler Charlie McKerron, a linchpin of the line-up ever since. More personnel changes ensued around the time of *Cascade*'s follow-up *Crosswinds* (1986), which was followed by a major hike in profile when Capercaillie were commissioned to create and perform the soundtrack for *The Blood is Strong*, a 1988 Channel 4 series on the history of Scottish Gaels. The same year saw the band embarking on their first US tour, joined by Donegal-born guitarist and bouzouki player Manus Lunny – brother of the legendary Dónal, who would himself produce Capercaillie's next three albums. The close-knit melodic partnership between Shaw and McKerron, together with Lunny's assertive rhythm work, laid further foundations for Capercaillie's mature sound on 1989's *Sidewalk*, which also featured Matheson's first English-language tracks, covering songs by John Martyn and Dick



Gaughan. *Sidewalk* helped bring the band to the attention of Survival Records, who promptly offered them a five-album deal.

The first fruit of this new partnership, *Delirium* (1991) was a career watershed on many levels. It contained Capercaillie's first original songs, again in English, and marked the addition of percussion to their armoury, reinforcing the music's increasingly muscular, groove-based approach. Above all, however, it included the track 'Coisich a Ruin', a brilliantly funk-ed-up version of a 400-year-old Gaelic work song, which was suddenly all over the radio and climbing up the pop charts. This unlikely of hits drew the kind of attention most Scottish folk acts – let alone Gaelic ones – can still only dream of, from headlines in *The Sun* to profiles in *The Times*, plus crowds of thousands at their gigs. *Delirium*'s successor, *Secret People* (1993), was an accomplished steady-as-she-goes affair, declining to venture too much farther down any commercial pop route while continuing to refine the rhythmic and textural aspects of Capercaillie's contemporary Celtic sound. Nonetheless, given Survival's understandable keenness to capitalise, things did get a trifle silly for a few years, with the A&R team dreaming up such proposals as a duet with Rod Stewart,

and that the band relocate to Ireland, à la Waterboys circa *Fisherman's Blues*.

Thankfully, Capercaillie have continued to resist such blandishments. In part, this is due to their original emergence coinciding with that of today's world music sector: their innovative approach to traditional sources and influences has always been informed far more by that context, than guided by

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mainstream ambitions. In particular, besides their deft deployment of pop and funk stylings, they have led the way in forging links between Scottish and other Celtic traditions, including those of Brittany, Galicia and Asturias, as well as Ireland. The widespread esteem in which they're held as pioneering role models is thus shared, not only by Scotland's younger folk talents, but also by their counterparts further afield.

After writing and performing on the soundtrack to the 1995 movie *Rob Roy*,



The changing faces of Capercaillie and, above, Charlie McKerron on fiddle and Donald Shaw on accordion

Capercaillie spread their musical wings yet wider with 1997's *Beautiful Wasteland*, recorded in Spain and featuring guest vocals by Guinean duo Hijas del Sol, plus an array of contemporary dance grooves. The late 90s also ushered in the line-up which remains in place today, with Shaw, Matheson, McKerron and Lunny joined by ex-Deacon Blue bassist Ewen Vernal, Mancunian star Mike McGoldrick on flute, whistles and uilleann pipes, and the drums/percussion team of Che Beresford and David Robertson.

The last decade or so has seen the band continuing to record at a consistent but unhurried rate, meanwhile securely ranked among the Celtic world's top live acts. Having celebrated the 20th anniversary of their recording debut with the double-disc retrospective *Grace and Pride*, Capercaillie are currently finishing work on a new studio album, to be launched with a full UK tour this autumn. ●

Capercaillie tour the UK from October 6-November 30
www.capercaillie.co.uk

You can hear excerpts from two Capercaillie songs on this issue's podcast

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BEST...

...ALBUMS



Delirium (Survival, 1991)
The big breakthrough album, showcasing the band's increasingly sophisticated synthesis of traditional and contemporary elements, newly beefed up with bass and drums. With vocal highlights including the hit single 'Coisich a Ruin', the sublime 'Breisleach' and Shaw's stirring composition 'Waiting for the Wheel to Turn', among classy instrumentals like the 'Islay Ranter's Reels', it's widely regarded as a modern classic.

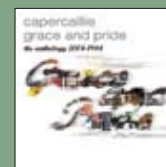


Beautiful Wasteland (Survival, 1997)
Named among 1997's albums of the year by both *Roots* and *Mojo*, this is the sound of a band splendidly back on track, after the occasionally mixed blessings of their brush with mainstream success. Guinean vocal duo Hijas del Sol feature memorably on two tracks, while the tunes are freshly invigorated by McGoldrick's maiden studio outing with the band.



Choice Language (Survival, 2003)
Twenty years on from their formation, Capercaillie combine the virtues of long-matured musicianship with continued inventive vitality. Slower standouts include the spine-tingling poignancy of 'Mile Marbhaig Air a Ghaol' (A Thousand Curses on Love) and 'I Will Set My Ship in Order', alongside instrumental sets tautly enlivened by loops and samples.

...COMPILATION



Grace and Pride: The Anthology 2004-1984 (Survival, 2004)
Note the title's reverse chronology: this discerningly chosen, 38-track retrospective, drawn from each of the band's 15 albums, as well as featuring rarities, unreleased remixes, and long-deleted material, proceeds backwards in sequence all the way to *Cascade*, deftly illuminating both the changes and the continuities in their sound.

...AVOIDED



Waulk Roots (Eureka, 2002)
Purported 'Best Of' actually featuring tracks from just two early releases, *Crosswinds* and *Sidewalk*, released as a spoiler to coincide with the far superior Survival collection *Dusk to Dawn*.

IF YOU LIKE CAPERCAILLIE, TRY...

Various Artists, *Gaelic Women: Ar Canan 'S Ar Ceol*



(Greentax, 1999)
Three years in the making, this hugely acclaimed album features specially arranged and recorded performances by a cross-generational swathe of Scotland's finest Gaelic singers, including Catherine-Ann MacPhee, Flora MacNeill, Ishbel MacAskill, Kenna Campbell and a certain Karen Matheson, backed by an all-star instrumental cast.