



Sue Wilson delves deep into Cape Breton's Scottish history at Canada's biggest celebration of Gaelic music

CELTIC COLOURS

Between 1775 and 1860, more than 25,000 Scots bade farewell to their native Highlands and Hebrides, sailed across 5,000km of ocean, and landed on the Canadian island of Cape Breton, just off the north-eastern tip of Nova Scotia. Some 150 years after the last of these settlers arrived, the Gaelic-based culture they brought with them provides the backdrop and underpinning for the annual Celtic Colours festival, a nine-day celebration of Cape Breton's past and present musical traditions, which celebrates its tenth outing this October. For a 21st century Scot, arriving after an 11-hour flight, the immediacy and vitality of Cape Breton's Caledonian connections is almost disorientating. Firstly there are the place names – Inverness, Dundee, Iona, Dunvegan – and the people's names, 90% of which seem to be prefixed with 'Mac'. Then – especially during Celtic Colours – there's the local music, which is dominated by reels, jigs and strathspeys, played on fiddles and bagpipes, along with a highly cherished Gaelic song tradition. There's also an almost palpable sense among many locals of retaining a direct, living connection with the "old country," evinced by conversations sprinkled with references to "my people" arriving from

Above: The autumnal colours of Englishtown, Cape Breton in all its splendour

Skye or Barra or Lochaber, as if it were a generation or two ago, rather than a couple of centuries.

In part this is due to Cape Breton's historical pattern of 'chain migration', whereby successive waves of immigrants would settle alongside earlier arrivals from the same island or district back home, enabling local lore and loyalties to survive. By far the most important factor today, though, is the music and the Gaelic language, through which Cape Bretoners are indeed still actively plugged into the life of their mother culture.

Among Scottish music scholars, Cape Breton has long been viewed as a precious lode of untouched tradition – untouched, that is, by the classical and Victorian influences which widely refashioned tunes, dance steps and playing styles in Scotland itself. Additionally, the island is the only place in the world outside Scotland where (Scottish) Gaelic is still spoken. While native speakers have dwindled from their late 19th century peak of 85,000 to an estimated 800 today, it continues to be passed on via the song tradition, and through the sterling efforts of the Gaelic College at St Ann's – home to Celtic Colours' nightly festival club.

In a contemporary context, Cape Breton music has ridden the wave of popularity enjoyed by all Celtic sounds in recent years,

although its profile has declined somewhat since the late 90s heyday of artists like the Rankin Family and Ashley MacIsaac. A solid phalanx of newer acts, however, continue to make inroads on the international circuit, inspired and mentored by older players such as the legendary fiddler Buddy MacMaster, mainstays of a lively home-grown scene still largely centred on traditional-style *ceilidhs*. This well developed grassroots infrastructure, and all the distinctive cultural nuances built into it, have been a key feature of Celtic Colours since its inception in 1997.

Modelling their format substantially on the long-running, world-renowned Shetland Folk Festival, Celtic Colours works with local communities to stage concerts the length and breadth – 175km by 140km – of the island. Shows take place in village halls, churches, school auditoria and community centres throughout the densely forested, sparsely populated country that covers most of Cape Breton, as well as purpose-built venues in its former industrial heartland, around the main town of Sydney.

Combined with the recruitment of some 900 volunteer helpers, this has fostered a genuine sense of ownership, investment and pride in the festival among the island's 140,000 population. There's also the bottom-line fact that Celtic Colours – held when the



woodlands' stunning autumnal foliage is at its height – extends Cape Breton's tourist season by nearly a fortnight, attracting thousands of extra visitors and generating some \$6 million in additional revenue. In a place whose hard-pressed economy carries further clear echoes of Scottish experience, with traditional industries like coal, steel and fishing inadequately supplanted by the service sector, sharing out these benefits island-wide has proved a particularly effective strategy.

Celtic Colours' programming originally focused on the twin objectives of showcasing local talent and forging links with Scottish artists. While this primary emphasis remains, the festival has since expanded its range to take in other Celtic territories and folk traditions, with this year's tenth line-up including acts from Ireland, Wales, Denmark, Spain, New Zealand, England, the US and Newfoundland, as well as Cape Breton and Scotland. Among the visiting headliners are banjo legend Béla Fleck, Galician piper Carlos Núñez, Anglo/Irish quartet Flook, Danish duo Haugaard & Høirup and Irish-American fiddler Liz Carroll, with the Scottish delegation headed up by Aly Bain, Phil Cunningham and the Unusual Suspects.

Festival concerts usually feature four or five acts, and are themed around a specific aspect of tradition or local heritage. Past examples include a tribute to the late Mi'kmaq fiddler Lee Cremona – a member of Cape Breton's native tribes – held in his home settlement of Eskasoni; concerts showcasing notable musical families linked to particular localities, like the fiddling Beatons of Mabou, or centred on a single instrument, such as the popular annual Guitar Summit or 2004's Piano Concert, the latter highlighting Cape Breton players' highly evolved, uniquely funky keyboard style.



The programme as a whole is generally bookended with two or three big gala nights in larger, urban venues, while latterly the festival has also begun commissioning ambitious original projects. These include the Unusual Suspects' first overseas venture two years ago, to produce a show with Cape Breton musicians – being reprised for 2006 – and Phil Cunningham's folk/orchestral suite *Full Circle*, premiered in 2005.

After the main evening concerts, the Festival Club kicks off around 11pm each night, in the imposing, stone-flagged main hall of the Gaelic College, complete

Clockwise from top left: Daniel Lapp who performs solo and with the Unusual Suspects (see next picture) this year; Galician piper Carlos Núñez on stage in 2003; accordion maestro Phil Cunningham who returns this year, pictured in 2002; Cape Breton guitarist Gordie Sampson

with open fire for extra atmosphere. The billing here comprises an ad hoc selection of acts from the official programme, often playing session-style in one-off collaborations, with the action onstage frequently lasting well after the bar shuts at 3am. Given its hours, the club tends to pull a younger crowd than many of the concerts, thus helping to build the audience that will see Celtic Colours through the next ten years. ●

www.celtic-colours.com
This year's Celtic Colours runs from October 6-14