

Shetland's Homecoming: Event leaves students 'reeling'

By Ramona Kirkness

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MUSICIANS, WRITERS AND ARTS craft students travelled to Shetland in August, in order to take part in a 7-day summer school known as 'Fiddle Frenzy'. And though it is usually an annual event, this year it was generously supported by 'Homecoming Scotland' which enabled the implementation of a new creative direction.

A total of 60 people, plus additional day students, were allocated the highly desirable placements – with an international presence from America, Australia, Spain, Sweden, Austria, Holland and Norway, as well as a strong contingent from various parts of England, the Borders, the central belt of Scotland and Shetland's islanders.

Gwilym Gibbons, Director of **Shetland Arts**, opened the **Creative Connections** summer school, saying: "For those of you who have travelled from far parts of the world and particularly those who have come from the rest of the UK – welcome to the United Kingdom's summer! We've had the summer here; we're still enjoying it!

The enthusiastic Shetland Arts team unveiled its ambitious new format and packed programme under the banner of 'Creative Connections', with students choosing to receive expert tuition in one of three areas – Music, Writing or Arts Craft – from the cream of Shetland's award-winning talent. A new artist-in-residence post and a **Homecoming Diaspora** art exhibition also added to the **2009 Homecoming Scotland** experience.



Aly Bain

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The **Scottish Arts Council** awarded Fiddle Frenzy in 2008 an overall performance and top score rating of 5 (excellent, conceived and executed to a high standard) – so it's little wonder the summer school is attracting a national and international audience. Now in its 6th year, Fiddle Frenzy has attracted students from as far afield as Bermuda, Canada, Italy and Japan due to its reputation.

Marie Fielding, Scottish Arts Council Specialist Advisor, gave last year's Artistic Appraisal and said: "Fiddle Frenzy is an exciting and unique opportunity to experience an intimate musical and cultural festival in Shetland...this festival...is definitely one of the best."

“In my opinion, Fiddle Frenzy provides a high quality service.”

Shetland Arts offered a breathtaking programme of performances, concerts, dances and fantastically funny comedy nights which were held either on remote islands, in local community halls or in larger venues across the mainland, such as the lovely **Garrison Theatre** and the large capacity **Clickimin Centre**.

Concerts included music-for-the-masses and hilarious banter from the much anticipated return of **Aly Bain** and **Phil Cunningham**, the energetically charged **Fiddlers' Bid** and a spine-tingling fiddle performance from **Bryan Gear** (the grandson of **Bobby Patterson**, who was one of the best Shetland fiddlers of his generation). He showed off his Shetland technical prowess and was accompanied effortlessly on piano by **Violet Tulloch**. The music reflected Shetland's strong traditional heritage, as new Shetland compositions sat next to traditional music infused with a modern technical twist.

There's no doubt about it, Shetland fiddlers showcase diverse technical skills and a unique sound, causing thrill-seekers to flock from many corners of the globe! I was certainly left sitting at the edge of my seat when I watched Shetland's **Teenage Fiddler** and **Young Traditional Fiddler** of the Year – who quite possibly were born holding fiddles in their hands!

Richard Wemyss, Shetland Arts Events and Venues Manager said: “Our musicians are our ambassadors.”

“If you want to see the best of Shetland music in one place, within one week,” Richard remarked, “this is the only place in the world you will ever get it. So come to Shetland!”

And topping off an already busy itinerary, a unique cultural programme complemented the daily workshops with optional trips to Shetland's outlying islands of **Whalsay** and **Fetlar** via coach and ferry. Professional and award-winning storytellers **Lawrence Tulloch**, **Davy Cooper** and **Elma Johnson** were always at hand to provide captivating entertainment on the island's heritage and folklore.

Richard commented: “I think it's important to get to some of these more remote islands as



Bryan Gear with Andrew Gifford

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well for the community and Fetlar in particular is so beautiful – its one of the best Shetland islands there is and it's [population is] in decline.”

On a social level, the concerts and evening dances create a rich and diverse community spirit by bringing the islanders and visitors together in a fun way. And with further entertainment and dances provided by **Fullselidh Spelemanslagg**, **The Heritage Fiddlers**, **The Shetland Fiddlers**, **Da Fustra** and **Leeshinaat** it's no wonder Shetland's 2009 Homecoming event left students reeling!

The introduction of the Creative Connections workshops was a great success, demonstrating that the new workshops generated an added dimension to the existing format. I participated in the new Creative Connections '**Makin' Wi' Wirds**' writing workshop, which was led by award-winning writer, **Jen Hadfield**.

Jen, 31, won the 2008 TS Eliot major literary prize for her second book of poetry, '**Nigh No Place**' (Bloodaxe). She led the eager group of mixed ability writers through a series of daily creative writing exercises. As an example, students were invited to “investigate emotional landscapes” which Jen referred to as ‘Heartlands’ and then respond using story, dramatic monologue, radio play or poetry formats.

“I wanted to encourage you to imagine a heartland for yourself – the geography, the geology, the wildlife and all of the features that make up a place – both concrete and emotional, and which are influenced by your experience in your life.”

“The idea that it might be possible to make yourself a home in writing by writing about places...if you're in a place for short spell of time, I always like the feeling that you can create a portable place by describing that place in writing,

which is coloured by your own experience; it's never just description."

"The one thing that poetry can do is broker a relationship between you and the natural world." It can "make us feel at home in the landscape"

No stranger to writing about "home" whether that be Canada or Scotland, Jen describes the physical landscape of Shetland as "obviously extraordinary".

"As we start going on the trips, I'm hoping that it will feed into what we are doing in the workshops," she said, which is exactly what happened. One of my most extraordinary and beautiful experiences was writing in a convent on the remote island of Fetlar. I used Shetland's landscape as a backdrop and penned a story there for the 2009 Storytelling **Festival Tall Tales** competition, which subsequently won first prize.

Shetland offers the writer a fantastically rich abundance of new words and sounds and Jen had encouraged students to collect language during the week. I used many examples from the sights and sounds discovered on the cultural and storytelling trips.

There was certainly an emotional connection within the group, which helped to build-up-our-writing-confidence. I valued our time reading and discussing published works and I felt more confident in using new creative styles. My optional one-to-one critique of my own work, with Jen, was robust and invaluable. I also enjoyed the interactive, one-off session with **John Haswell**, Arts Development Officer for Drama. This extra workshop covered practical performance and stage skills and proved to be insightful and invigorating.

Because of the programme's diversity, the new creative direction definitely opened up the creative possibilities, which would not have been possible if it simply focused on one art form. Indeed, its success was in inspiring joint projects between the musicians and writers, musicians and knitters, and writers and storytellers.

"I think people were mixing and mingling across the board in that sort of festival community feeling," said Richard. "My ambition for the next few years is trying to improve that community feel."

And with musicians dropping into knitting sessions and writers sharing their ideas with musicians – the creative opportunities multiplied! And who knows what future projects will

Phil Cunningham



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materialize and develop from the enthusiastic collaborations.

"The reason that fiddle playing is so lively in Shetland, is the fact that it's a living tradition"

"There was a great moment when the knitters were talking about making Shetland patterned cushions or pillows and then they went and got some musicians to record a lullaby that they would then put inside."

Richard enthused: "That for me is what it's about – we are giving folks new experiences."

Now having looked at what's happened over the last few years we've found that beginners are absolute beginners – we've even had people buying fiddles to come here!

The music workshop classes were split into four sections – beginners, slow, medium-fast and fast in order that students get the most out of their time spent learning and playing. The emphasis in the morning workshops was about learning the tunes by ear. Although daunting to some at first, through experience and verbal feedback it seems people learn and soak up more when they play and learn by this method.

"I think the slow class this year – and it's going to depend on the makeup of every class each year – learnt maybe three-quarters of a tune in the first hour, whereas the fast class learnt four tunes in the one hour!"

Violet Tulloch

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“That’s quite an interesting difference in speed of learning and it’s up to the tutor to gauge the speed the class can cope with.”

In the afternoon workshops, students have the opportunity to “get much more of the Shetland idiom in bowing and slurs and grace notes” by focusing on technique. And due to the school’s high quality tuition and reputation, even classically trained musicians attend the summer school workshops favouring the scope it gives to broaden skills and techniques!

Coming from a family of composers and well-known musicians, **Kaela Jamieson** is an accomplished fiddle player and the youngest tutor at age 16. Richard explained how she came to be a Frenzy fiddle tutor.

“I set up a youth music project two years ago, which was about teaching young people to learn tunes in their area – because there are variations in tunes right across Shetland – and then teaching them to other young people. Rather than the local traditions dying out, it was about widening the knowledge base out to include as many young people in the area as possible and giving them the skills to be tutors. Kaela tutored two years ago on that and since then we’ve brought her in as a tutor and she’s fantastic.”

Shetland Arts continued to promote the diverse array of music found in **Fetlar, Papa Stour,**

Whalsay and **Cullivoe**, as well as in **Cape Breton** in Canada and Scandinavian countries.

Gibby Hutchison, aged 91, made a special visit to the fiddle school midweek when students travelled to the remote island of Whalsay. The day was a memorable highlight for the musicians because Gibby is the last of the old Whalsay-style fiddlers. Whalsay is often referred to as the ‘Bonnie Isle’ and it lived up to its name, looking beautiful in the warm summer sunshine, which extended into the late evening. Gibby’s son John taught guitar during the week.

Shetland Arts have also published a few booklets with CDs – one with ten session sets recorded at slow speed and then played to speed. Next year there are plans to produce a booklet and CD on tips and techniques on the Whalsay-style, as well as further innovative resources which focus on different styles or different instruments. Students receive a pack of music and a CD, in order to help them prepare for their end-of-week concert, prior to their trip as well as a leaving pack at the end.

Secret of success

In my search for understanding of what makes people return, I spoke to **Mike Faulds**. Mike, from Dalkeith, is a Fiddle Frenzy participant and he has been attending the event for a number of years. The first time he attended he thought it was “marvellous” but reasoned it was probably due to the fact that it was his “first time”. Speculating whether each year could be as good as the last one, he was not disappointed this time around. “The third was absolutely fantastic!”

In the current economic climate, the summer school certainly brings a welcome financial benefit to Shetland’s economy, with students from 10 years to retirement age who, with their partners, save up and spend a “significant” amount over the festival period on accommodation, travel, meals and the obligatory tourist purchases.

So what’s the secret to their success? Well, Shetland Arts champion amazing hospitality with a friendly approachable service. Their flexible approach plus one-to-one tutoring sessions means that you can tailor-make your week to suit your interests, peppering it with the cultural delights of Shetland’s stunningly varied landscape. They’re also passionate about ensuring that each person fully enjoys the Creative Connections experience, whether you’re a new participant or a returning student – even to the point of giving out their mobile numbers! Now how’s that for service?

They encourage constructive dialogue and

highly value the input they receive from their students through the provision of feedback sheets and suggestions and comments received throughout the year via email. They consistently review and act upon suggestions in order to better each year's experience – a practice that concurs with Mike's positive experience.

Mike congratulated the Shetland Arts team who he said worked overtime to ensure Fiddle Frenzy participants gained maximum enjoyment, whilst encouraging participants to share "any ideas" or suggestions, ensuring the highest degree of quality and standards achieved.

"Every year they've taken these things on...they really do take the thing very seriously."

And perhaps that's why Fiddle Frenzy was nominated runner-up at the 2008 **MG Alba Scots Trad Music Awards** in the category of "Event of the Year". (Nominations for 2009 awards are invited on the "Hands Up For Trad" website). No doubt there are hopes for Shetland to top this great achievement at the music awards weekend held in Dumfries on 27–29 November!


With Mike's wife encouraging him to book up now for the 2010 Creative Connections/Fiddle Frenzy summer school, I asked him what the attraction was "It's a number of things," he said. "It's the fact that they all welcome you back like a long lost cousin. Everyone seems to make you feel so welcome".

Next year, **The Shetland Fiddlers** will celebrate their 50th anniversary, whilst Fiddle Frenzy's underlying theme will no doubt focus on the centenary of **Dr Tom (Tammie) Anderson MBE**. Renowned for the massive musical contribution he

made to Shetland – in saving Shetland's musical heritage, lobbying to get Shetland music into the schools and thereafter becoming the first tutor – he has certainly left a lasting legacy in the form of successful musicians making a living as a musician and captivating audiences across the world.

He travelled around Shetland making taped sound recordings of musicians playing. You can access these recordings in the Shetland Museum and Archives.

Fiddle Frenzy music tutors in 2010 will include **Catriona MacDonald** and **Jenna Reid**. **Jen Hadfield** will lead the Makin 'Wi' Wirds creative writing workshop. The Arts Craft experience will run a workshop in traditional Shetland knitting (techniques in a contemporary context) and a new painting and drawing workshop (Shetland's landscapes and seascapes). Add to that the Storytelling Festival, trips to remote islands and concerts galore, and you can understand fully why this is a primary holiday destination for many people of all ages and nationalities!

Book now and make it the talking point of your 2010 holiday! 

The Creative Connections summer school runs from Mon 9 to Sun 15 August 2010.

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