

The Campbells are Coming

EILIDH WHITEFORD, April 2012 – Stornoway Gazette, Isle of Lewis

THE ‘First Lady’ of World Music in Scotland, BBC Radio 3 broadcaster and influential performer and producer Mary Ann Kennedy needs little introduction having spent her life championing the music of others with her trademark passionate knowledge and sense of fun.

Indeed, the roots music world is very familiar with Mary Ann – and now she has turned to her own roots for a landmark album and book release with celebrates one of the greatest dynasties of Scottish Gaelic song – the Campbells

Caimbeulaich a Ghnìoba in their native Gaelic, Mary Ann’s family, the Campbells from the Isle of Skye, are renowned pipers and singers famed throughout the Gaidhealtachd and beyond as highly skilled and talented tradition bearers

No fewer than seven Campbells have won Mod Gold Medals. And now five of them have come together to record, perform and lovingly recount the story of the world and people that brought them their music through album and book ‘Fonn’.

Growing up in what they saw as the musical ‘centre of the universe’ – the last house at the end of the road beyond the one-street township of Roag – the family were part of a world where music was the absolute constant to the whole community’s rural way of life, across generations.

From the start, the Campbells’ repertoire was a reflection on the world around them – songs of work, worship, land, sea, dancing, love and sporting; songs from the village itself.

The world conjured by these are of a genuinely happy time and place, of little wealth but great riches, and one where community was the bubbling life-source that sustained them.

Mary Ann comments: “Music and singing was part of my family life from day one. Mum and Uncle Seumas grew up with music very much as a part of the community and a way of life – you went to visit someone, you had a song; young went to work on the croft, you had a song.” Bringing many of those songs back to life, joining Mary Ann in Fonn is her mother, Dr Kenna Campbell, who has mentored several winners of the BBC’s top Folk and Trad awards for young musicians as senior tutor at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; and her brother Seumas Campbell, the instigator of a 1980s movement in Gaelic choral singing that shook the repertoire of a then conservative musical genre.

Wilma Kennedy, Mary Ann’s sister is a leader of the vocal team at the National Centre of

Excellence in Traditional Music, and her cousin Maggie Macdonald is one of the most highly-respected tutors in the government-sponsored Youth Music Initiative, introducing young people throughout Scotland to music.

The banding together of the Campbells for Fonn came about in 2009 when the family were introduced to producer Jerry Boys, who had been enticed to Scotland to look at a Gaelic music project.

Jerry's Grammy award-winning career as producer and engineer and former owner of London's legendary Livingstone Studios stretches from Abbey Road and the Beatles to Malian world music legend Toumani Diabate and Buena Vista Social Club; and on hearing the family perform in a packed and mostly Gaelic-speaking Dunvegan Village Hall at a celebration for matriarch Kenna, he had a 'eureka moment' and offered then and there to produce an album.

It was then up to the Campbells to explore their wealth of traditional music – a journey which Mary Ann revelled in: "The discoveries we've made on this project, especially for the young generation, have been so exciting," she says.

"Looking through the archives at the School of Scottish Studies, even one generation back they were singing songs that we young ones had never heard – songs that were very, very local, elegant and very witty and dry. They've been touchstones for all of us." Mary Ann expands: "We even found a track which we had no equipment to play, so Maggie's mum Ann helped us find equipment and we heard Ann singing when she was in her early 20s – it was so spooky as she sounded so like Maggie.

It feels at times that the whole project has come about through a series of coincidences and an alignment of the stars!" she laughs.

Recorded with Jerry in Mary Ann's Watercolour Music studios in Lochaber over 'one magical week', Fonn is an album of songs and puirt (mouth music) featuring the five singers as well as special guest, Scots-Californian fiddle star Aladsair Fraser and his cellist partner American Natalie Haas; James Lindsay from award-winning trad band Breabach, and the Red Hot Chilli Piper's Lorne MacDougall.

And taking the family on tour this month, the Campbells are also joined by dancer Nick Gareth from the States, described by Mary Ann as a 'force of nature'.

"The dance suits the music perfectly and he 'gets' the music," she says. "It's his first visit to the Western Isles and is definitely something not to be missed. He's a force of nature as a dancer and really quite inspirational to watch perform."

Music, dance, all that's missing now is words – but they too are accounted for with the production of an accompanying book 'Fonn', published by Acair Books.

The family had previously been approached by the publishing house to compile a biography and music collection, documenting the world of an essentially modest, quite family who revelled in music, and to bring together the songs that are part of the family repertoire.

“We all took it as a great compliment when Acair got in touch and then the project grew arms and legs as the Acair lavished so much care and expertise on it,” Mary Ann explains.

“The book is now massive! It’s 300 pages, full colour hardback and contains 120 songs connected to the family. Puirt a beaul features strongly as that’s what my mother’s generation learnt so I think it will be really interesting for people to see those and I really hope that it stands as a resource and record of the tradition well into the future.