

Buena Vista Boys' introduction to Gaelic through joining the Campbell clan

JIM GILCHRIST, April 2012 – The Scotsman, Edinburgh

AS ANY band will tell you, taking to the road as a group is no trifling undertaking; even more so, one might imagine, when you're all family.

It is indeed a daunting prospect, "although we're all really looking forward to it," says Gaelic singer, harpist and broadcaster Mary Ann Kennedy, who launches a Scottish tour tonight with four other members of her family, collectively known as the Campbells of Greepe.

This is rather more than a musical family jaunt, given the Campbells' status as tradition bearers – not to mention the fact that their new album has been produced by Jerry Boys, a name more associated with the Buena Vista Social Club and Ali Farka Touré than with Gaelic song.

Greepe was an outlying croft beyond the hamlet of Roag, on Skye, and former home to the Campbells, who include seven Mod winners. The five family members involved in the tour are: Kennedy's mother, Dr Kenna Campbell, a renowned singer who teaches Gaelic song at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; her brother, Seumas Campbell, an influential activist on the Gaelic choir scene; Kenna's two daughters, Mary Ann and Wilma, the latter teaching at the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music at Plockton; and Kenna's niece, Maggie MacDonald, also a singing tutor.

Their tour, which starts tonight in Edinburgh, coincides with the launch of what is literally a family album, Fonn – a Gaelic word meaning both "territory" and "melody", recorded at Watercolour Music studios, run by Kennedy and her husband Nick Turner, in Lochaber. Music and place both resonate, even though the house at Greepe is no longer theirs, and Mary Ann and her sister grew up in Pollokshields, part of Glasgow's Highland diaspora – or "Weegie-Gaels", as Kennedy calls them. "Glasgow's as much part of us as is the Isle of Skye," she explains.

Greepe, however, remains a sort of psychic touchstone. "It is still so much part of the music," she adds, "and of the older ones' upbringing in a community where music was very much alive, that it is absolutely fundamental."

The album's sleevenotes comment that "music was like drawing breath", and when Mary Ann and her sister were growing up in Glasgow, she says, it took some time for them to realise that not all their neighbours were quite so musically centred

An illustrated Campbell biography and music collection is being published in June by Acair Books of Stornoway. In the meantime, the album, which features guest musicians such as the fiddle-cello pairing of Alasdair Fraser and Natalie Haas, stands as a vivid sampling of the family song store, from skittish puirt-a-beul ("mouth music") to local songs, plangent

laments and Kennedy's notable Gaelic setting of Down to the River to Pray, the original hymn popularised by the film Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?

Does the involvement of the Grammy-winning Boys – whose CV goes back to The Beatles but more recently takes in the Buena Vistas, Ali Farka Touré and Ry Cooder – mean more than merely adding a certain cachet?

“I loved the albums he made with Buena Vista and especially with [Malian musician] Bassekou Kouyate and the depth of perception he got, sound-wise,” says Kennedy. “Also, he went for a live sound, with very few overdubs, which was really important in the way our sound turned out.

“It was quite nerve-racking, but,” she laughs, “he handled the family dynamics beautifully.” For his part Boys, who first heard the Campbells performing in Dunvegan village hall and was an instant convert, remarks on “a closeness in their harmonies that probably only comes from being blood relatives

“You know as soon as you hear them that their singing comes straight from the heart.”