

The Campbells are Coming

KENNY PATERSON, April 2012 – Southern Reporter, Borders, Scotland

They should be times to enjoy, but often family get-togethers such as Christmas Day and birthday celebrations can become as stressful as peace talks in Syria. So, imagine five members of the same clan recording a live album, locked in a small studio in Lochaber for a week?

Even for the successful Campbell dynasty it proved “challenging”, admits Mary Ann Kennedy, the highly acclaimed Gaelic singer and radio presenter. But by the end of it, The Campbells had produced debut album Fonn, with Grammy award-winning producer Jerry Boys, a book, and had decided to go on tour, with a visit to Peebles’ Eastgate Theatre this month.

*It is an incredible story of how one family, originally from the outskirts of the tiny Isle of Skye community Roag, managed to produce seven Mod Gold Medal winners – Gaeldom’s premier award for singing. Five of them feature on the album – alongside Mary Ann is mother Kenna, her uncle Seumas, sister Wilma Kennedy and Kenna’s niece Maggie Macdonald. Speaking to **TheSouthern**, Mary Ann said: “Music has always been part of the family. “The five of us sang together 15 years ago and we obviously enjoyed it so much it took us 12 years to get back together! “It was someone else who suggested we go to the Edinburgh [International Harp] Festival and we thought ‘Maybe we can do this’. I think we feel more comfortable in our own skins than 15 years ago.”*

The album was pushed through after Boys heard the quintet singing at a Gaelic music project in 2009 and was so impressed he offered to help put their music to CD. So they retreated to Mary Ann’s recording studio, which she shares with husband Nick, but it was not a straightforward process. Mary Ann told us: “Jerry Boys put together the Buena Vista Social Club album and worked with The Beatles, so it was quite scary. As well as that, we were recording everything as live as possible, which added to the experience but also made it a challenge. It wasn’t all smiles and cheeriness. Everyone is a little bit nervous when stepping into a recording studio anyway, particularly when you are singing, because you are putting yourself out there.”

Attempts to revive Gaelic in Scotland has seen investment from the Scottish Government, a decision criticised by a number of non-speakers who believe the funding is disproportionate to the 58,000 who use the language. But Mary Ann passionately defends Gaelic. She said: “Gaelic is a traditional part of the Scottish psyche, geography and people. It is a small number of people who speak the language now, but even for the people who don’t speak it, Gaelic touches many events of Scottish life. “It is in place names and words in the English language. What Gaelic gives us is a different way to see the world.”

As for her Peebles date, Mary Ann, whose Global Gathering show on BBC Radio Scotland is set to be controversially axed on May 8, will be joined by dancer Nic Gareiss. “Nic is the most beautiful dancer I have ever seen,” she added. “He really understands the music and

language, although he is from the United States. He puts a twist to Scottish step dancing. My cousin Priscilla Scott lives in Melrose and has promised to bring a group of friends to the gig, so it should be a good night."