

Luck's always in the mix for producer Jerry

MARGARET CHRYSTALL, April 2012 – Highland News, Inverness

If producer Jerry Boys has learned anything in over 40 years of engineering legendary acts, it's never to ignore the odd quirk of fate.

It's what led Jerry to the Havana sound desk that captured the world music best-seller Buena Vista Social Club – now eight million albums sold and counting – and the series of Cuban music albums that followed.

And it was only after the falling-through of a Gaelic music project Jerry had been working on with Gaelic singer, musician and BBC presenter Mary Ann Kennedy, that the seeds of the Campbell family album, Fonn, were sown.

"Absolutely the best records come with a large amount of luck involved," he laughed. "I'd met Mary Ann four years ago and was planning to make an album of traditional Gaelic songs. Tha fell through, but I went to see the Campbells perform and, frankly, was blown away by it."

Two years on, the album – featuring two generations of Mary Ann's family, the Campbells of Greepe on Skye – is being launched at a series of Scottish dates, including Eden Court tonight (Thursday).

For Jerry, two different generations working together also reminds him of the Buena Vista recordings. He said: "Fonn doesn't have quite such a wide age range. There, we had people from 18 to 80 and that is always interesting."

Originally in Cuba in 1996 to record a collaboration between Cuban and African musicians from Mali, Jerry revealed the Malians didn't appear and veteran [Cuban] musicians and singers were invited to record instead.

"But we swore to carry on and make a record. Other Cuban musicians were introduced and the sessions became the Buena Vista Social Club. I have to say that if we'd gone ahead and made the album we were originally going to record, it probably wouldn't have done as well!"

Jerry went on to record three more solo albums with one of the Buena Vista stars Ibrahim Ferrer and two with female singing legend Omara Portuondo – who guested at Eden Court with a Buena Vista line-up last year.

Jerry – who is also a four-time Grammy winner – started his career at Abbey Road studios from 1965 to 1968, though he points out that he was too junior to be involved in actual Beatles recordings. It's also from those days he evolved his belief that a group of people playing live in the studio makes for the best recording. Jerry said: "With Fonn, it's basically all there – and all the better for it!"

One of the most famous names in music apparently agrees with his view. Jerry was an assistant engineer when Rolling Stones once recorded. "I do remember Mick coming in to do a vocal on his own. Unlike most people who would just stand at the mic, he asked for the playback coming out of the speaker, grabbed a hand mic, and basically did a show! He did

the whole thing twice and then said, 'Right, that's it!' Recording a vocal performance is a hard thing to do in a sterile environment so I was very impressed with that!"

One of the most glamorous singers Jerry has worked with is Colombian star Shakira. Fellow Colombian, writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez invited the singer to provide two songs for the film of his book Love in the Time of Cholera. Jerry laughed: "Shakira is a very attractive lady! She came in to do the songs and wanted them to be a bit Buena Vista-y. She is very experienced in the studio and produces all her own work, so it was interesting to work with her."

Over the years, Jerry's come across stars he feels should have been huge, including 70s band Argent. "I also worked on the solo album of Level 42 bassist Mark King – and he was an amazing musician." Godfather of folk Martin Carthy also impressed the mixing desk guru. "If he had wanted to move to a broader spectrum of music, I think he would have been colossal – he really has soul. African musician Ali Farka Touré is another great who is very natural in the studio!"

For the last three months, Jerry has been working with young American singer songwriter Sam Amidon. And Jerry's stretched his own boundaries, possibly, into poppier territory mixing Dutch singer Kris Berry – "Brenda Lee meets Motown and a little bit of jazz". But finally last year, the album Jerry had originally intended to record at Havana's famous EGREM studio was made. "It's called AfroCubism and involves the Malian musicians who were going to be involved in the project originally."

As well as recording in prestigious studios across the world, some of the remotest took him to Africa. "I recorded Ali Farka Touré in his home town, 60 miles from Timbuktu!" laughed Jerry.

These days, he usually works in both Cornwall – where he lives – and London. "I go where people come from too – as I did with the Campbells. It's easier for me to go to them and it can be less pressure than coming to London.

Sadly, Jerry won't make it to this concert, though. "But I've become good friends with Mary Ann. And if this album – which I think is beautiful – goes well, we could well do another one. You never know!"