

# MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE INFLUENCE OF SCOTTISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH JAZZ

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## ABSTRACT

Scottish traditional music manifests itself not only within a traditional music context but also within the music of many Scottish musical artists that span a myriad of styles and backgrounds. One of the most fascinating areas of intersection occurs when traditional music and contemporary Scottish jazz come together to create music that is engaging and distinctive. By examining the music of a number of Scottish jazz artists as well as utilising interview material from three of these artists, this article examines how Scottish traditional music can merge so effectively within Scottish jazz music and what effect this has upon the listener. In addition to this, the role of the music scene in which this occurs will also be considered as this provides context for musical connections to be made by musicians. This study reveals the importance that musical interaction across musical styles can have within the creation of new, distinctive music. By examining these musical connections at a local level, musicians and listeners alike can gain a greater understanding of these musical processes and why they are important within the wider context of musical practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Music cannot exist in isolation. Like any other creative practice, it must develop from something prior, as the creation of new work is the advancing of an existing practice. This grounds any musical practice within the larger ecosystem of musical activity and by investigating these processes we can better understand and contextualise our own listening and playing. Both practitioners and listeners can develop a deeper understanding of specific styles and practices by considering how musical interactions have contributed to the development of new musical sounds. This places value on holistic approaches to artistic practice by inciting experimentation, multiculturalism, collaboration, and general curiosity as opposed to a limited, closed practice that can lead to homogenisation of culture. Such approaches are important in a modern hyper-connected world in which artists have access to a vast range of influences which can potentially stimulate diverse creative ideas. This study investigates how interaction in music occurs at a local level in Scotland with a focus on Glasgow, which boasts an active music scene where various musical styles and practices interact with one another within a creative space. Scottish traditional music and jazz have demonstrated a distinctive relationship in the way that musicians of each style influence one another. By examining these two styles more closely, how they interact with other musical practices and how they interact with each other, the importance of musical interconnectivity can be evaluated. Openness and adaptability to other musical practices can aid musicians in taking a holistic approach to music making in that they draw on elements from outside their own sphere of practice, prompting them to create music that can be considered unique, engaging and culturally relevant. This study will discuss how the interaction of jazz and Scottish traditional music is manifested within the music of a number of Scottish jazz artists. Although there are several ways in which Scottish traditional music manifests itself in contemporary Scottish jazz,

this article will focus on melody, improvisation and presentation. The two styles are examined separately to outline how they both exhibit traditions that are continuously developing. This means they are 'living traditions' which allows them to interact with other styles while retaining a connection to their rich musical histories.

## SCOTTISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

To accurately define the traditional music of any country is considered a 'musicologist's nightmare' (Moulton, 2009). This is due to a number of factors but, according to David McGuinness, the most notable one is the problematic nature of the term itself which is "prone to misunderstanding" and has 'a variety of meanings to different users that can obscure rather than clarify' (McGuinness, 2018). For example, Scotland's 'variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds is reflected in our music' (Purser, 1992) meaning Scotland exhibits a truly diverse musical landscape with regional and cultural factions each of which can be considered 'traditional'. Not only is the musical landscape incredibly diverse, but it has also been continuously changing for centuries, so that any scholarly attempt to define the borders of traditional music is 'doomed to failure as the tradition by its nature will adapt and eventually include elements which are initially considered to be outside it' (McGuinness, 2018). Any formal definition would therefore contradict itself in regard to what does and does not constitute traditional music. An attempt to define such an encompassing musical style merely creates boundaries that restrict the natural 'handing on' (McGuinness, 2018) from generation to generation. When Perthshire fiddler Niel Gow published *Part Second of the Complete Repository of Original Scots Tunes, Strathspeys, Jigs and Dances* he believed that this collection would,

'...serve as a standard of those national tunes and dances...for, we cannot avoid mentioning, that in every part of Scotland where we have occasionally been, and from every observation we were able to make, have not once met with two professional musicians who play the same notes of any tune...the Standard now proposed, will we hope, appear abundantly apparent; and that a conformity in playing those tunes, may with great propriety be adopted.' (Gow, 1799)

In attempting to unify Scottish fiddle practice he merely created a small 'subset' of regulated tradition that was most likely ignored by many rural fiddlers (McGuinness, 2018).

Instead, it is important to consider Scottish traditional music within the context of wider contemporary culture. This enables us to place it more easily in relation to other musical styles. Instead of attempting to define traditional music in regard to ideas of authenticity and oldness, scholars, such as Simon McKerrill, suggest that traditional music should be defined by its practice and its 'shared culture, belonging to an ethnic, political, mythological, gendered or geographically bounded nation or community where we share music, dance, stories, ideas, practises and experience' (McKerrill, 2016). This idea of creating a sense of 'belonging' in a community through the practice of music is certainly far closer to McGuinness' idea of a more open-ended, inclusive, living tradition. This is arguably more useful as it supports the notion that traditional music is defined by practice within an overall cultural context rather than definitions of oldness and authenticity. Instead, it thrives on current practices while acknowledging a musical history. This enables artists themselves to take control of the style and regenerate it over and over again. Overall, Scottish traditional music is a style around which a scene is created, a sense of belonging through musical interaction and appreciation. Within this scene or community, music from the past is adapted alongside the development of new music, and they both are a reflection of the community.

## JAZZ

Much like traditional music, the many manifestations of jazz music make it very difficult to define without imposing artistic limitations. Similarly to the Niel Gow example, when institutionalising jazz with his *Jazz at Lincoln Centre* program, Wynton Marsalis attempts to define the style, assuming an ownership of it (McGuinness, 2018). This potentially legitimises it in the eyes of national cultural establishments, such as the Lincoln Centre, and therefore potentially limits jazz artistically by placing boundaries on what jazz is and is not. This severely restricts the music's ability to adapt and develop past these defined boundaries, and therefore limits its ability to interact and connect with other styles of music. This could cause jazz to slip into the relative obscurity like a previously practiced art form from a past era. Instead, like traditional music, jazz should be considered a living tradition in which musicians continue to play and adapt music from the past while also playing and developing new music.

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND JAZZ

It is interesting to observe a number of similarities between Scottish traditional music and jazz that allow them to interact so seamlessly. For example, the general openness of the two styles has resulted in a level of fluidity within both of their canonical repertoires. Contemporary music outside the traditional jazz canon is adopted into the repertoire, creating the concept of the 'modern standard'. Hip-hop has a strong presence

in contemporary jazz culture, from the original compositions of jazz artists, such as Robert Glasper or Takuya Kuroda, to international artist Christian Scott performing a Jay-Z song or Berklee jazz students jamming a Kendrick Lamar song. These are hardly comparable to classic jazz standards, such as *I Got Rhythm* by George Gerswin, yet they have been openly adopted into the repertoire. Similarly, in traditional music, musicians, such as the late Martyn Bennett, introduced elements of electronic dance music into their music. The influence of that music can still be clearly heard in the music of contemporary traditional/folk bands, such as Niteworks, Elephant Sessions, and Treacherous Orchestra. By being active living traditions, jazz and Scottish traditional music can continuously reinvent themselves and interact with other musical styles. In doing so, they retain their cultural relevance and appeal to new audiences. Other similarities include the concept of interaction within a community often in jam sessions among small groups of acoustic instruments. This common practice makes it unsurprising that the two styles often intersect as they coexist in the same local spaces.

For some decades now, jazz musicians from other European countries have been drawing on their cultural heritage as a means of expanding and developing jazz as an art form. Perhaps the most recognised, or at least the most discussed instance of the exploration of intersections between jazz and native traditional music, is in Scandinavia. At this point it is interesting to recall what McGuinness discussed in regard to tradition and the manner in which creative artists will always push past allocated boundaries. Native traditional music allowed Scandinavian jazz music to assume a role separate from its defined American origins. Instead, it creates music that takes on a level of 'semantic potentiality' that is 'relevant to performers and audiences' (Bjerstedt, 2015). The earliest instance of this on record is the seminal album *Jazz på svenska* (Johansson, 1964) by Swedish pianist Jan Johansson. While substantial jazz elements remained like improvisation, the overtly Swedish aesthetic derived from Swedish traditional music demonstrates how a sense of ownership of the music was being established (Medbøe, 2011). Other musicians followed Johansson, such as the Norwegian bass player Arild Andersen, who said 'I became increasingly aware that this music was very much a part of who I am as a musician...I began to seek simplicity and meaning' (Andersen quoted by Nicolson, 2005). Evidently, this 'meaning' was not to be found in a defined American style of jazz but rather a style that could develop in a way that reflected the cultural backgrounds and issues of those in whose hands the music now found itself.

But what about Scottish jazz? There are a number of Scottish jazz artists whose music is influenced by Scottish traditional music in some way, including artists such as Colin Steele, Tommy Smith, Fat-Suit, Graeme Stephens and Talisker to name a few. It has been acknowledged that the collaborative, fluid nature of jazz and traditional music is a main contributing factor to this but going further, what effect does this have on the music and the way that we experience it as listeners? As previously stated, there are a number of ways that Scottish traditional music can influence the music of Scottish jazz artists. The following sections examine this in regard to melody, improvisation, and the presentation of music.

## MELODY AND IMPROVISATION

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Scottish traditional music influences jazz is through melody as emphasis on melody is one of the most characteristic elements of traditional music. A musician whose music exhibits this very clearly is the young

Scottish jazz pianist and composer, Fergus McCreadie. His compositions, which can be heard on his album *TURAS* (McCreadie, 2018), all feature very distinct melodies similar to those found in traditional music. Discussing his approach to writing melodies, McCreadie said that

'I would say a lot of jazz is very focused on maybe more harmonic and rhythmic elements than melodic elements and while that's really satisfying for a musician to hear it's maybe not so satisfying for the average listener to hear. Scottish folk music is always, or the vast majority of the time, I'm sure is focusing on the tunes and the melodies and stuff like that. So, I find that blending the two my compositions take on a more...they're just a bit more melodic than when I've tried to write something that's like, as you say, just like in the jazz tradition. Folk music lends itself a lot to melody at least a lot more than jazz nowadays does, I think.' (McCreadie, 2017)

This insight is very revealing, and it clearly relates back to the idea of musicians looking to extend their musical horizons beyond the traditional sound of jazz in an American mould. The melodies that McCreadie writes not only sound 'Scottish' in the way that they incorporate rhythms, structures, and harmonic content from Scottish traditional music, but they are also distinctly melodic and expressive. The contours of the musical phrases in many instances are very close to vocal music or songs perhaps clearest on *The Old Harbour*, *The Teacher*, and *Ardbeg*. Others are very similar to Scottish traditional instrumental music. For example, the melodies in compositions such as *The Back Burn* and *The Set*, both of which can be categorised as 'reels', a type of Scottish traditional dance. Yet despite this clear traditional music connection, McCreadie and his trio approach the tunes with a clear jazz aesthetic. Discussing *The Set*, McCreadie says 'I also kind of wanted to have something which was me improvising on a reel but as if it were a jazz standard so that the notes were Scottish but the approach was jazz'. What McCreadie means by this is despite the clear Scottish quality of the composition, it is still used as a platform for jazz improvisation.

Crucially, this jazz approach of improvising is what allows jazz musicians to contextualise this traditional music influence within their own practice, specifically the practice of improvising. Improvising is a key element of jazz and has been throughout its history. It is the act of spontaneously creating new melodies over the repeated structure of a jazz composition. Having played the melody of a composition, members of a band will take turns to develop and extend the melody by improvising, using the original melody as a framework upon which to base the spontaneous creation of new melodies. If jazz improvisation is an extending of an initial melodic idea, it stands to reason that the extending of an expressive melodic idea will result in melodic and expressive improvisation. Relating this to McCreadie's music, the improvisations on tracks, such as *Ardbeg* and *The Old Harbour*, are quite clearly derived from their song-like melodies that it is almost possible to sing the resulting improvisations note for note. By writing melodies that are so strongly influenced by traditional music, musicians like Fergus McCreadie are effectively giving themselves more to work with when it comes to crafting expressive, engaging improvisations.

### PRESENTATION

Scottish traditional music can also influence the way in which Scottish jazz artists present their music. The way that music is presented to listeners from track titles to album covers can affect the degree with which various listeners engage with the work. For example, the guitarist and composer Chris Amer's

wonderfully named EP, *Car Journey to North Berwick* (Amer, 2016) includes titles such as *An Overnight Stay In Stockbridge* and *View From A Hyndland Window*. Amer discusses these titles:

'For me they are actually quite sincere reflections of what I was thinking about at the time.

The titles for me are very important and in Scottish music one thing I love is they're always about a place or a person or an event. They're [traditional musicians] not afraid to write a tune about a bridge or a tree or a house or something like that.' (Amer, 2017)

Amer's track titles present very specific images that conjure up specific stylistic atmospheres and by presenting the listener with an image they can then relate what they are hearing with some kind of tangible concept. Drummer and composer Corrie Dick holds a similar opinion:

'Something I really admire in folk bands is, well stuff like Lau [traditional band], you can find yourself in worlds really quite abstract but it's still friendly. People can get in on it.

In the same way guys introduce songs in folk gigs like 'this is written about this because this' and it's just like a wee story or maybe something bigger, I don't know. Yeah like wee stories being attached the tunes is quite...it's a nice thing.' (Dick, 2017)

By no means is this a way to pander to audiences. Traditional bands like Lau are ultimately entertaining yet play highly intricate traditional music. Lau are, however, able to do this as, in the words of Dick, 'they're funny as f\*\*k!' (Dick, 2017). 'The reason I play music is to connect with people' (Dick, 2017), says Dick, which he certainly does with his album, *Impossible Things* (Dick, 2015). It is fluid in style and moves between contemporary jazz, traditional music, Moroccan and West African music, and the style of a singer/songwriter. The influence of Scottish traditional music is present throughout the album and is particularly prominent on tracks like the fiddle and whistle led *King William Walk*. Like Amer, the track titles on Dick's album include *Farewell Modhachaidh* and *What Has Become of Albert?* which offer audiences a story or an idea that entice them into the music. The album artwork of *Impossible Things* too certainly does not look like a typical contemporary jazz album. Instead, it could easily be an acoustic singer/songwriter or even a Scottish traditional album. This all serves to remove some of the stylistic barriers that some listeners might find surround jazz music.

### THE LISTENING EXPERIENCE

At this point one can consider how melodies, melodic improvisation, and presentation contribute towards the experience of the listener. In many ways it could be argued that these elements are pivotal in engaging and focusing the attention of the listener. A strong, distinctive melody will provide a point of departure for listeners, so that they can follow the expressive, improvisational development of the melody and relate it to the melody the musician is developing. The title of a composition might offer an image of a person or a place that the essentially abstract music is written about. Words being sung by a voice achieve a similar effect. In essence, these things can offer a means by which listeners can engage with challenging music as this does not compromise the integrity of the music or pander to an audience. Much of the music mentioned can at times be intense and challenging but, having effectively engaged the listener, improvising jazz musicians can push their music into far more challenging territories while still allowing

their audiences to follow. As will now be discussed, this idea of audience engagement is very relevant within the context of a wider music scene.

### THE MUSIC SCENE

Within an interconnected music scene, the venues in which listeners experience and discover new music play a key role in the dissemination of new musical ideas. Until very recently, Glasgow did not have a dedicated jazz venue. It might initially seem that the lack of specific jazz venues in Glasgow would be detrimental to the city's jazz scene, but this has not been the case. Instead, Glasgow has a number of music venues across the city that host jazz sessions in addition to hosting other styles of music throughout the week. One can, therefore, find live jazz in Glasgow almost every night of the week. Venues like *The Butterfly and Pig*, *Slouch*, *Swing*, *MacSouleys*, *Bloc*, *Tchai Ovna*, and *The Blue Arrow* are just a few of the establishments that host live jazz on a regular basis. These venues, however, are not dedicated strictly to jazz apart from *The Blue Arrow*. The consequences of this are both interesting and important to recognise. In the way that the term 'tradition' is problematic in that it can be associated with a fixed idea of what traditional music is, so too can be the word jazz since for some people the term has specific connotations of a musical image. This could be the three hour 'relaxing jazz and bossa nova' playlists found when searching the word 'jazz' in YouTube, or perhaps it is of *The Fast Show's* Jazz Club. For this reason, many people would not go to a venue labelled 'jazz club'. The word jazz, like the word tradition, creates a boundary around the music in the sense that one solely hears jazz music in a jazz club. This does, however, not seem to be the case in Glasgow as music of various styles share performance spaces and, more importantly, share audiences, so this preliminary boundary does not exist. After the gig begins, the significance of audience engagement becomes paramount as jazz musicians in Glasgow will, therefore, find themselves playing to a mixed audience of jazz and non-jazz listeners. Yet by drawing on influences other than jazz, this can appeal to people who would not necessarily listen to 'straight ahead' jazz. By transcending a stylistic boundary, the music is able to appeal to a far larger group of people. Despite the music remaining challenging with complex and sometimes abstract harmonic and rhythmic elements in addition to substantial improvisation, external influences, such as traditional music, provide audiences with ways to engage with the performance.

Looking at this more broadly, the idea of a 'music scene' is where musicians work and interact with other musicians. It is at this level that musical connections are made as musicians from different practices work and interact with one another. One of the best examples of this is the band Fat-Suit. The genesis of this band in a way represents the Glasgow music scene at large, as Fat-Suit are the result of musicians of various styles, mainly jazz and traditional, playing and interacting with one another while studying the bachelor's degrees in applied music at the University of Strathclyde. The result is that the music of Fat-Suit is a fusion of contemporary jazz, traditional music, funk, rock, dance, and all manner of styles brought by individual members of the band. For example, tracks such as *No Regrets* (Fat-Suit, 2013) and *Cowfords* (Fat-Suit, 2016), are fiddle led ballads, while tracks such as *Sound Logic* (Fat-Suit, 2014) and *Menace Mouse* (Fat-Suit, 2013), have at their core traditional-inspired melodies despite being synth heavy, groove-driven jazz fusion tracks. Until 2014, the Strathclyde course allowed young jazz musicians to remain in Scotland while studying, and the jazz course at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) continues to do this. The RCS also offers the only bachelor's course in

traditional music in the UK, so many young traditional musicians and jazz musicians not only perform in the same venues but also study within the same educational institution. An excellent example of this is the band Oxtored to the Bothy. Comprising of both traditional and jazz musicians, this band formed while its members studied together at the RCS, and they play a virtuosic fusion of jazz and traditional music that is both melodic, atmospheric, and expressive while also firmly rooted in the grooves and harmonies of jazz.

For many musicians, the boundaries and distinctions between musical styles do not exist. Many musicians move fluently from one style to another, from one gig to the next. A fine example of this was the collaboration at the 2017 Edinburgh Jazz Festival between 2017 Young Scottish Jazz Musician of the Year, bassist David Bowden and 2017 Young Traditional Musician of the Year, fiddler Charlie Stewart. It should also be noted that, despite being a celebrated traditional fiddle player, Stewart also studies jazz bass at the RCS. Their band consisted of musicians from across the spectrum of jazz and traditional music with some playing in both jazz and traditional bands. It is, therefore, clear that musicians will very actively make these connections in order to enrich their musical potentials. They welcome and generally seek out these opportunities. Chris Amer has a fascinating perspective on this situation as a musician who moves within both these interacting circles of jazz and traditional music:

'...because I came this convoluted route via jazz there's a mutual excitement. They're [traditional musicians] very excited about what I've learned and done and likewise I am excited in what they do. There's like a sincere desire to play and to talk and to listen and to check each other's stuff out and I think if you all were to come the same direct route there couldn't not really be an element of competitiveness or something to it. But, of course, we've all come slightly different. It creates a happy environment and scene to work in more so than if everyone were trying to do the exact same thing.' (Amer, 2017)

With such an eagerness and enthusiasm amongst musicians it is no wonder that music of such a diverse nature is produced that reflects this. Creative artists will not be confined by stylistic boundaries and the fluidity of the Glasgow music scene further aids this, so that music is informed by a myriad of other musical styles, performance practices, and cultures. By working within an environment not confined by musical boundaries, musicians will, either intentionally or unintentionally, begin to reflect that environment by producing music that is essentially holistic and unique.

### CONCLUSION

The influence of Scottish traditional music in contemporary Scottish jazz is a fine example of how a holistic approach to music-making aids musicians in creating music that is engaging, emotive and unique. Being aware of these musical connections and relationships allows musicians and listeners to gain a deeper understanding of the musical and cultural processes at work within active musical environments. Experimentation, multiculturalism, collaboration, and general curiosity are essential for these processes to be effective and these cannot occur within a limited, homogenised creative space. For Scottish jazz musicians, the liberty to freely interact and be influenced by other musical styles within this space has galvanised a wave of musical activity that takes full advantage of the 'living traditions' and the eclectic music scene that is on hand to them. This musical activity is an example of how an

active and interconnecting music scene both feeds the creativity of these musicians and is in turn fed by their creative outputs.

This relationship is vital for the development and survival of musical culture. If musical styles are open to interactions with other styles, not only are they more likely to create something new, but they can also engage a far wider audience. By understanding this relationship, musicians and listeners can think critically about the music that is presented to them in regard to how styles might relate - be it through shared characteristics in a melody that allows for effective jazz improvisation, a track title that suggests a story or an image, or perhaps an album cover that establishes an engaging yet unintimidating aesthetic. By thinking critically, we are able to

engage with musicians' artistic efforts, pushing them to further develop connections between musical entities.

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