

# Contemporary Gaelic Bands

by Ed Pearlman

Most natives of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia have heard the Gaelic spoken; indeed, many speak it themselves. They are descendants of the Highland Scots who fled a homeland turned hostile during the Clearances of 1780-1850.

During the new Celtic Colours Festival held in Cape Breton this fall, one of the biggest hits was Capercaillie, the contemporary Gaelic band from Scotland. Cape Bretoners both young and old seemed to glow with the pulsing rhythms of the modern Gaelic-based music. The old traditions are being revitalized with new sounds, and the bonds across the Atlantic remain. In the famous words of one Canadian Scot, back in 1829: "The blood is strong."

Capercaillie is at the forefront of Scotland's Gaelic bands. With worldwide tours and some half a million albums in circulation, they are one of the hottest Celtic groups today. Since winning the 1985 Pan-Celtic Festival, they've produced nine albums, two of them this year: *To the Moon*, and *Beautiful Wasteland*.

Perhaps you heard them in the film *Rob Roy*. They have also made soundtracks for television films, including one about the Highland Clearances entitled *The Blood Is Strong*. A CD by that name has come out featuring Gaelic songs from this and two other TV films, plus a bit of the atmospheric music that has become a part of Capercaillie's sound, perhaps as a result of their film work.

Capercaillie's music is not easy to categorize. People call it "world music." But it comes from the heart of Scotland.

Their singer, Karen Matheson, learned Gaelic songs from her grandmother, a MacNeill of Barra, in the Western Isles. Charlie McKerron, from the Buchan coast in eastern Scotland, was an award-winning traditional fiddler before joining the band in the 1980s. These two musicians (out of eight in the band) exemplify the kind of crossbreeding of Scottish musical roots that infuses Capercaillie with a fresh sound not easily reproduced outside of Scotland.

The east coast music can be found in the medleys of traditional fiddle tunes interspersed in Capercaillie's recordings, especially on earlier albums such as *Crosswinds* and *Sidewaulk*. The Gaelic music of the west is evident in the song repertoire, and perhaps also in the soft edge of the band's sound, which is neither folk nor new age nor rock, despite its mix of electric and acoustic instruments.

In fact, I would venture to say that the Gaelic music has shaped Capercaillie's worldbeat style. As I listen to their music, I no longer hear the African drums and Latin percussion as imports to a Scottish band; I hear those instruments and other world music idioms being used because they help express Gaelic musical ideas.

Here are three of the "nonwestern" rhythms you could listen for in the Gaelic songs. First, listen to the

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way they sometimes leave out beats or shorten a musical phrase. Try singing "Twinkle, twinkle little star" and leave out the word "sky." You'll sing "...like a diamond in the Twinkle, twinkle..." You've just dropped a beat. Gaelic waulking songs (rhythmic songs for working the cloth) may seem like they lose a beat when the verse is not the same length as the chorus, or when phrases are of different lengths. This is not common in English-language songs or in western music in general.

Now sing part of a song, take a big breath, and then continue from where you left off. You've added time to the song. If someone is playing along with you, they may get confused. But if you have musicians of the caliber of Capercaillie, they work with the extra beats and make something musical of it. Gaelic singers often add time with a breath, and Capercaillie has built this idea into their music.

Another Gaelic quality to listen for is strong syncopation, especially in the "mouth music" (songs for dancing). This is not merely jazzy; it is integral to the Gaelic language and its songs. Capercaillie backs up these song rhythms with two drummers (one with a regular drum set and one with hand-beaten drums and marraccas) and two strummers (electric bass and bouzouki/guitar). Even the accordion, fiddle and whistle often play rhythm in this band.

Many of these rhythmic ideas can also be heard in other Gaelic-based bands with varying styles. Interestingly, the English-language songs and instrumentals of these bands, including Capercaillie, are often more regular and predictable in their rhythms and styles than Gaelic selections by the same band.

Some of these other Gaelic bands include the popular folk rock band Runrig, and the more traditional Tannas. A recording by Mouth Music, with American singer Talitha MacKenzie, offers some amazing worldbeat music based on the Gaelic. Capercaillie's Karen Matheson has a solo album entitled *The Dreaming Sea*, and Gaelic singer and bagpiper Anna Mhoireach and her band are worth a good listen on *Out of the Blue* and *Into Indigo*. Canadian Mary Jane Lamond dishes up Gaelic songs with an attitude on her new solo album, *Suas e!*. And Scottish/Brazilian Paul Mounsey mixes Gaelic singing with hip-hop and techno grooves in his brilliant *Nahoo* album and the new *NahooToo* with Flora MacNeil.

Of course, although rhythm is the heartbeat of music, there is more to these Gaelic bands than pure rhythm. There is also a great sensitivity to the depth and beauty of Gaelic and English-language songs, and to the moving commemoration of the Highland Clearances. You need not know a word of Gaelic to appreciate their albums or concerts.

Ten years after visiting Cape Breton on its first foreign tour, Capercaillie returned this fall to a warm reception. What to many Americans may seem eclectic worldbeat music was heard in Cape Breton as familiar old rhythms with a fresh young face, there where the blood is strong.