

Ian Greentrax and Greentrax Records

by Ed Pearlman

Back in the 1940s in Forres, a town between Inverness and Aberdeen, a boy named Ian Green used to watch his dad and his uncle march up and down in front of the house, playing the pipes together for hours. Musicians would drop in at the house to play fiddle, spoons, and other musical implements, and ceilidhs in the village hall would provide yet more music.

Though he never really took to an instrument himself, Ian developed a passion for traditional music that "has changed the face of Scottish music, permanently and hugely for the better," according to Brian McNeill, Head of Scottish Music at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow.

Brian was speaking of Greentrax Records. The brainchild of Ian Green, this record label now offers well over 200 recordings that spotlight the vitality of Scotland's music and many of her finest musicians.

Green did not set out to start a record label. After serving in the army in Korea, he joined the Edinburgh Police, where he remained on the job for a full 30 years. But during that time, he became hooked by Scottish music, first by seeing the Corries and other folk artists on TV, and then by frequenting the thriving folk clubs of Edinburgh. In the 1960s, he founded the Edinburgh Police Folk Club, which became one of the best folk clubs in Scotland, and ten years later co-founded the Edinburgh Folk Club, still recognized as among the best.

There were times during the 1960s and 70s when "folkies" and policemen didn't always see eye to eye, but sharing music at the folk club (fondly known as "Fuzzfolk") certainly promoted a greater understanding. Ian learned years later that some senior officers actually eyed this "folkie" policeman as a possible "left-wing threat" and even held up his promotion for a while. He retired in 1985 as a Police Inspector (equivalent in the U.S. to a lieutenant).

One year later, he launched Greentrax Records. By the mid 1980s, the Scottish folk clubs had spawned many excellent traditional singers and instrumentalists, yet recordings were maddeningly sparse, outside of a few small labels with local or in-house musicians. Green felt that the entire British music industry was pretty much neglecting the traditional music of Scotland in favor of stereotyped pipers and singers spun off from the music hall era of Harry Lauder. This was about to change dramatically.

Ian Green sank his police pension into recording the contemporary musical talent of Scotland, and to the surprise of many, his record company filled a need and took off. The initial impetus was a new book of tunes by fiddler Ian Hardie, which Green thought would make a fine record-

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ing. Then the great folk duo, the McCalmans, offered to record an album, the first of ten made for Greentrax.

An exciting panorama of music followed. A quick tour of the catalog might begin with the beautiful Gaelic songs from Cathy-Ann MacPhee, Billy Ross, Mairi MacInnes (including an album of Gaelic children's songs), and waulking songs from the women's group, Bannal. A sampling of some of Scotland's best Gaelic singers can be heard on *Gaelic Women*, a recording that capped three years of work, and was followed up by a unique and moving concert at the Celtic Connections Festival.

Pipe bands on the Greentrax label range from the popular Black Watch regimental band to MacUmba, which blends traditional pipe band music with Latin percussion. Top solo pipers can be heard on the *World Masters of Piping* album, and a set of four CDs preserves historic oral instruction in classical bagpipe piobaireachd. Contemporary piping albums include high quality, accessible CDs from, among others, Iain MacInnes, Hamish Moore, Dougie Pincock and Gordon Duncan, who debuted on Greentrax and just put out his third album, *Thunderstruck*, in April.

The broad range of Scottish folk singers on Greentrax include two of the most influential, Dick Gaughan and Eric Bogle. Both have new CDs on the label: Gaughan's *Prentice Piece* is a double CD representing three decades of this hardhitting songwriter's best work, and Bogle's *Colour of Dreams* contains poignant songs typical of this well-known Scottish emigre to Australia, including a song about 9/11.

The historic posthumous CD by singer and guitarist Tony Cuffe, *Sae Will We Yet*, came out in March, offering some of Tony's favorite Scottish and Irish love songs, plus other previously unreleased material. (See this column, spring 2002, for more on Tony Cuffe.)

Scots Women, a double CD with glorious multi-voice and solo singing, is a Scots complement to the *Gaelic Women* album. Last fall, Jacobite songs were highlighted in a CD called *The King Has Landed*, featuring a broad cross-section of singers from Ewan MacColl and the Corries to Rod Paterson and Jim Malcolm.

Sheena Wellington, whose bold Scots voice inspired the opening of the Scottish Parliament, released her latest work, *Hamely Fare*, this spring. Her singing of Burns's "A Man's A Man For A' That" at the Parliament provided one measure of the growing appreciation for Scottish traditional music. A few decades ago, the preferred singer might well have been a classically trained tenor.

The broad selection of Scottish music on Greentrax extends also to ceilidh bands, guitarists such as Tony McManus, harpers such as Wendy Stewart (whose new album, *Standing Wave*, was issued in April), and fiddlers such as the powerful Willie Hunter, the snazzy Gordon Gunn,

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or the slinky playing of Jennifer Wrigley. Greentrax has also brought out recordings of Cape Breton artists, including fiddler Natalie MacMaster and the band Slainte Mhath.

Some of the most exciting and popular albums on the label come from Celtic touring bands, including the venerable Whistlebinkies, Jock Tamson's Bairns and Ossian, as well as debuts by Deaf Shepherd, Malinky, Burach, and the cutting edge Shooglenifty.

Many Greentrax releases have been debut albums, because of Ian Green's commitment to supporting young Scottish talent, even if some of their titles barely break even. Tony McManus underlines that Greentrax "has provided me and many other musicians with a platform to develop our talents." The latest debut project involves GiveWay, an award-winning quartet of teenage sisters from Midlothian, whose album is due out in June.

Ian Green's broad musical tastes allow Greentrax to stray from traditionally based music, though he points out that "it all has to have some Scottish connection." A new sublabel called G2 was set up especially for these forays, which include the hot Latin sound of Salsa Celtica, and the dance beat of Keltik Elektrik.

Not all Greentrax albums are contemporary. Ian Green practically fell off his chair with pride when Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies asked him to make available their Scottish Tradition series, which draws on some 8000 hours of field recordings to document many aspects of Scottish culture. About 20 CDs and accompanying booklets are now available, exploring Gaelic songs, traditional fiddling styles, pibroch, bothy ballads, storytelling, Gaelic psalms and other topics.

The universal respect musicians have for Ian Green and his record label is remarkable. Singer Ed Miller expresses the views of many when he touts Greentrax's "taste, honesty, decency and great selection of Scottish music." Even Green himself remarks, "I have always been dead straight with people, and in business, especially, this can be seen sometimes as unusual and refreshing."

Talent and tradition mean little in themselves, unless the talent is developed and the tradition explored. Ian Green's passion for Scotland's rich musical heritage has helped make Scottish talent and tradition shine by providing practical support and exposure. Radio stations, musicians and listeners around the world are now able to appreciate the vitality of Scottish music in a way never before possible.

Who could know that a young boy surrounded by dedicated musicians, who didn't even play an instrument or work in a related field, would end up, in his second career, opening so many doors for the flowering of Scotland's music?