

Tony Cuffe

by Ed Pearlman

We watched him sit quietly in his wheelchair last November, draped in a Scottish flag, smiling weakly, his pleased eyes taking in the unexpected outpouring of appreciation--a standing ovation. Guitar in hand, he was on stage for the last time. One of Scotland's greatest guitarists and singers, Tony Cuffe passed away a week before Christmas at the age of 47.

Tony's performances, most notably as lead singer and guitarist with Scotland's pivotal band Ossian in the 1980s, are as fresh today on CD as they were then. His solo album, *When First I Went to Caledonia*, easily bears repeated listening, and his fairly recent contributions of a number of songs to the first two volumes of Linn Records' *Complete Songs of Robert Burns* are captivating.

An inspired instrumentalist and a unique singer, Tony Cuffe's life and music were centered in the traditions of Scotland. Although he happily worked with colleagues and students on Celtic music from Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and beyond, his own personal repertoire of songs and tunes was drawn from traditional Scottish sources. Many of the songs we hear in his recordings from the 1980s remained a part of his performances throughout his life.

Tony Cuffe was born and raised in Greenock, near Glasgow. His Irish surname comes from his father, who emigrated from Ireland at the age of 5. The oldest boy in the family, Tom, played bagpipes, and made a strong impression on Tony's understanding of Scottish music. Tony taught himself whistle and guitar, and in the 1970s became known as one of Scotland's leading guitarists through his work in a succession of bands. He founded the traditional band Alba, and soon after, joined Jock Tamson's Bairsns.

"Jock Tamson" is the Scottish "John Doe," and "bairns" is Scots for "children," so the expression "we're a' Jock Tamson's bairns" basically says that at the end of the day, we're all the same. The commitment of Scottish traditional musicians like Tony Cuffe has been to strengthen the common bonds of Scots by digging out Scotland's great traditional music and presenting it afresh to all who will listen.

In 1980, Cuffe joined Ossian, a well-respected band comprised at the time of talented multi-instrumentalists Billy Jackson, George Jackson, John Martin, and Billy Ross. Of their eight recordings, we'll take a closer look at two, *Seal Song* and *Borders*, to tell the tale that needs telling.

Ossian's third album, *Seal Song*, was the first to feature Tony Cuffe. It starts off with a pipe tune played on fiddle by John Martin. He is joined by Cuffe on guitar, with a fingerpicking rhythm that enlivens the entire medley. Tony picked the metal strings with long fingernails, much like the ancient players of the clarsach (metal-strung harp). His fingerpicking precision allowed for lively birls (quickly repeated notes, a common piping ornament), and his unusual tuning of the guitar permitted rich droning on open strings while he played a melody or chords on the higher strings.

The best way to appreciate Cuffe's mastery of the guitar is to listen to a solo guitar air such as

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“Coilsfield House” on *Seal Song*, or “Miss Wharton Duff” on his solo album. While playing the melody of the air, he also plucked chords, sometimes spreading out the chord notes to soften their impact, and sometimes plucking them all at once to give a precise beat; at the same time he added drones or rhythmic arpeggios on the lower strings, often introducing unusual chords or bass lines that soothe or build tension and excitement. (If you think this is too much to say at one time in one sentence, just listen to how much Tony Cuffe does at one time with one instrument!)

Tony Cuffe’s guitar work has had a great impact on other musicians, and many fine guitarists, such as Tony McManus, point to Cuffe as a major inspiration.

The songs on *Seal Song* are typical of Tony Cuffe’s repertoire: two by Robert Burns (the lively “Corn Rigs,” and the reflective “Aye Waukin-O”), one from an Aberdeenshire bothy ballads collection, one a breathless Jacobite song telling of bold Highlandmen routing their enemy, and “The Road to Drumleman,” for which Tony wrote the beautiful melody.

Tony’s strong, resonant voice was unique, perhaps because it drew on his sensibilities as an instrumentalist. Like all good singers, he sang from the heart and could draw out plaintive notes, but he could also bring a sharp and rhythmic edge to his voice, with explosive syllables that perfectly suit the rhythm and power of many Scottish songs. Even the grace notes in his singing are more precise than most singers, and recall the rhythmic feel of pipes or fiddle. As a result, he was one of few singers who could easily sing for dancing. On many occasions I heard him sing, in fact, for a Highland dancer, Laura Scott.

Ossian’s *Borders* album was Tony’s favorite. Although all the Ossian recordings are great listening, this one represents a kind of flowering for the band. By including piper Iain MacDonald, it brings together Scotland’s three national instruments--pipes, fiddle, and harp--along with vocals, guitar, whistles and uilleann pipes.

Borders bristles with creative ideas. Cuffe composed a tune for the traditional Scots words of “I Will Set My Ship In Order,” and in “Bide Ye Yet,” he added new verses in Scots, perfectly matching the sound and feel of the original lyrics. Iain MacDonald wrote a new part for the final pipe tune of the album, and the band beautifully arranged one of my favorite tracks, a medley of two Cape Breton reels, played slowly with rich instrumentation.

Tony’s album, *When First I Went To Caledonia*, was truly a solo effort: he played all seven instruments on the recording! Other recordings that feature him, aside from Ossian’s *Seal Song* and *Borders*, and the Linn Records Burns albums mentioned above, are Ossian’s *Dove Across the Water*, *Light On a Distant Shore* (currently out of print), and *The Best of Ossian*. A number of other recordings include his guitar work accompanying other musicians, such as Billy Jackson and Jerry O’Sullivan.

In 1989, Tony Cuffe and his family moved to Boston, in the U.S., where they lived for the rest of his life. Ironically, they were about to move back to Scotland last year when he learned he had cancer.

In the U.S., Tony proved to be a treasure, performing and teaching in the Boston area as well as elsewhere in the country. He was the only professional Scots singer for many miles around, and was often called upon to sing, play solo guitar, or to tour with the Windbags, Seamus Connolly, Bonnie Rideout,

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Laura Scott and myself, and others. His wry humor added to all occasions (“spam is the primary reason why Americans should never make fun of haggis”). A dedicated family man with three children, he was always up for playing at ceilidhs and pulling out his wooden dancing man, Donald, for the children.

It’s no wonder that hundreds of people attended two concerts in Boston to benefit Tony Cuffe and his family, and that musicians from far and wide came in to perform. Unexpectedly, he was able to make it up on stage one more time to join in the final numbers. Like many hardworking musicians, Tony gave a great deal to students and listeners over the years without realizing how much it meant to everyone. Those last standing ovations managed to give a little back while he was still with us.

In a time when many musicians worry about impressing audiences with quick-paced variety, Tony Cuffe captured his listeners by tapping the freshness and vitality of traditional music. This is the legacy of Tony and his original circle of Scottish musicians, whose impact has broadened like ripples on a pool, helping revive Scottish pride and international appreciation for Scottish traditional music.