

Gig review: Shetland Folk Festival

Wednesday 8 May 2013

The fiddles were out and the tunes in the bar got started pretty much the minute the Shetland ferry left Aberdeen last Wednesday night, the 12-hour voyage serving as a time-honoured preamble to the islands' world-famous annual four-day orgy of music-making.

By the time we were half-way to Lerwick, cultural and stylistic boundaries were already a thing of the past, as Cuban, Cajun and Cape Breton headliners from this year's line-up traded songs and grooves in the intoxicating spirit of spontaneous collaboration and mutual inspiration that Shetland's festival distils to such a unique potency.

North American and Irish acts featured prominently in this year's programme, highlighting the diversity of sounds flourishing from both territories' traditions today, while also revealing the



interconnections within them. From Canada, April Verch specialises in the hybrid heritage of her native Ottawa Valley, most spectacularly in its extravagant step-dancing style, which – alongside her skills on fiddle and vocals – proved a major hit with Shetland audiences.

There were interesting overlaps between her repertoire, too, and on the one hand that of North Carolina's Woody Pines – both sharing a fondness for brilliantly sassy, snazzy old-time swing-jazz – and on the other her compatriots Cóg, whose Scottish-based medleys displayed a similar drive.

Comprising five individual stars of the current Cape Breton scene, collectively wielding three fiddles, guitar, banjo, mandolin and piano, Cóg likewise delivered a string of superb performances, matching the formidable power of their massed attack with an adroitly varied set-list and richly sophisticated arrangements.

From a more southerly latitude across the Pond, nicely complementing Woody Pines's winning blend of vintage components – which also included Appalachian, blues, country and original material – Cajun singer, fiddler and accordionist Cedric Watson drew expertly and lovingly on several eras and sub-genres of Louisiana tradition, balancing stripped-to-essentials rawness with sensuous sonic textures and charismatic showmanship.

On the Irish front, The Rambling Boys of Pleasure are a recently-formed five-piece of well-established figures, including singer and bodhran player Gino Lupari, accordionist David Munnelly and singer/guitarist Alan Burke.

They came across still as something of a work-in-progress, incorporating aspects of Irish/American cross-fertilisation reminiscent of Lupari's other band Four Men and a Dog, but while their overall sound may not yet have fully gelled, individual numbers – from blistering tune sets to Burke's intensely expressive, beautifully ornamented singing – promised treats in store when it does.

Glasgow's Irish diaspora, meanwhile, was splendidly represented by accordionist Paddy Callaghan and his trio, demonstrating the fluency, finesse and technical authority that earned his reigning status as Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year.

The linchpin role of Shetland's own musicians throughout [the festival](#) was showcased afresh at Lerwick's stunning new Mareel venue in The Isles Gathering, an outstanding joint performance with a visiting squad of Orkney performers, which deservedly won a prolonged standing ovation.

And later on Saturday night, to cap the weekend's already copious joys – as the Festival Club resounded with yet another magical melting-pot of impromptu music – came tidings that a long-serving member of the organising committee had gone into labour, hastily delegated her duties, and produced a bouncing baby boy.