

# Eilidh Steel



by Fiona Heywood

“...A great ambassador for traditional music as well as being a highly accomplished player and tunesmith...”

(Gillian MacDonald, Fèis Dhùn Èideann)

Scotland is full of great musicians. Some we hear about all the time, their PR machines churning out press release after press release about how we really need to hear them. Some we see on every stage, at every festival – they are enjoying their moment in the limelight, but it may soon fade. And some are not so ‘in your face’, but they are there. They quietly work away in the background, making music happen, without the fuss and the hype and they are often the backbones of the traditional music scene. I can think of quite a few.

Edinburgh based Eilidh Steel could be one such person. With great passion for the music of Scotland and an impressive musical CV, she isn't in the public eye too often, but she is behind a lot of the good music that is coming out of the capital at the moment.

Eilidh grew up in Helensburgh on the west coast of Scotland and music has always been a big part of her life. “I first saw the fiddle being played at a house ceilidh at my parents’ friend’s house in Rhu at Hogmanay and I’ve been told that I just sat at the fiddler’s feet in awe. I was four years old at the time and from that point I started begging my parents for a fiddle, but as nobody would teach me at that young age, they waited. I



Photo: Mark Neal

kept on begging until my sixth birthday when I was delighted to get up to find a fiddle lying in the living room. I soon started lessons with local classical violin teacher, Helen Reid-Foster - Helen is a really inspiring teacher; she taught me classical violin but she also enjoys playing traditional music and I feel like I got the best of two worlds learning from her. I joined the Helensburgh Fiddlers (a group like a strathspey and reel society) who performed at a lot of local events, which is where I learned a lot of traditional tunes, including many local ones.”

In addition to hearing local players, from an early age Eilidh was a big fan of Aly Bain’s playing. “Sometimes my mum would let me stay up late on a school night so I could watch Gaelic TV programmes which would feature great fiddlers. I listened to as much music as possible and often got a new CD and would spend hours learning all the tunes from it.”

Her professional playing career started early. “I started playing with a ceilidh band, The Midges, with three men from Dumbarton,

and during my last year at school I spent some of it on tour abroad in Russia and Romania with them (as well as playing all my school ceilidhs and my own leavers’ ball with them). I still play with the accordionist Billy MacPhee, who now lives in South Uist, every so often and I’m thankful to him for teaching me so many tunes from the island as well as useful skills like using microphones and PA systems at a young age.”

“While I was still at secondary school, I spent a couple of summers attending short courses at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic college on Skye, and was fortunate to be taught by Karen Steven, Iain MacFarlane and Buddy MacMaster. The classes were all taught by ear and as well as learning huge amounts from them musically, I also feel I picked up so much from their styles of teaching, which still influence me today when I teach.”

“When I met Karen Steven there, I found out that she taught a college course in traditional music performance in Easter Ross. So I instantly decided (at the tender age of 14) that when I finished school, I’d like to be taught by her for a year and then go on to study at the RSAMD (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and luckily, this is what I did. I had a fantastic year at North Highland College (part of the University of the Highlands and Islands), then I auditioned and received the Sir Jimmy Shand scholarship to study a BA Honours in Scottish Music at the RSAMD. Since graduating, I’ve worked as a professional musician - a mixture of performing, composing, recording, teaching and I’m also involved with organising a festival.”

The Scots Fiddle Festival, held over three days every November in Edinburgh, is one of the main festivals in the Scottish calendar and attracts fiddlers from all over the world, both as performers and

audience members. Eilidh now has the role of Artistic Director.

“I originally went to the Scots Fiddle Festival as a work placement while at college and really enjoyed being involved, so I decided to join the committee, mostly with the programming side of things. Over the years, I became Artistic Director and was employed to work for the festival instead of being a volunteer (it’s a voluntary run festival and a charity). I work all year round on this and nearer the time, I speak on various radio shows to promote the event. I am also involved with co-ordinating and teaching the festival’s outreach project and schools’ visits. One of the biggest draws to the festival is its inclusiveness - over the weekend you will see people of all levels playing together - complete beginners sitting next to professional musicians - and all ages and nationalities.”

“I’m really proud of how it is going. Two years ago we were over the moon when the festival won the Event Of The Year in the MG ALBA Scots Trad Music Awards. It seems to be getting bigger and bigger, with more events, more international acts and international audiences coming to the city to attend. It’s hard work to organise it, but it’s all worth it when the weekend comes and the place comes to life with great music and buzzing audiences.”

But while Eilidh loves the buzz that comes from running a successful festival and enjoys the hard work that goes along with it, she says that performing and composing are really her first-loves. She plays in various incarnations and a look at the gig list on her website confirms that she is a performer in demand herself.

She plays in a duo with guitarist / singer Mark Neal, originally from

East Kilbride and now living in Edinburgh. Their performances combine their own tunes and songs with lots of traditional material and their influences are wide, including much from Argyll and the west coast of Scotland. “I’ve been playing in a duo with Mark for 10 years now. We met at a late night session at the Balconie Inn in Evanton (Ross-shire) when both of us were booked to perform at a festival. We really enjoyed playing music together and shortly after started performing as a duo. Since then, we have performed at many festivals and done quite a bit of touring, including a two month tour round Europe.”

“I feel that Mark brings out my playing in a different way. He can play complex chord structures which really highlight and boost the stylistic nuances of the tune, but also sensitive accompaniment for slow airs. He is also a great singer and writes his own songs.

A few years ago we released our EP and we have recently finished recording an album, which will be called *Imprints*. It’s currently being mastered by Gordon Gunn (a respected fiddler and mastering engineer from Wick) and we plan to launch it in September. We recorded it at Mark’s studio, The Sonic Lodge, in Edinburgh and it features a couple of tracks with percussionist Allan MacDonald (son of piper Allan MacDonald of Glenuig). It contains many of my own compositions and traditional highland tunes, songs written by Mark and a couple of more traditional ones. There are lots of Argyllshire influences - Mark sometimes calls me a ‘tune geek’, but I have a great love for researching tunes and finding tunes from old tune collections, as well as finding modern ones from around that area.”

In another collaboration, Eilidh has also recently released an

## Cammie's Tune In memory of Cammie Gaskill

(c)2007 Eilidh F. Steel





“...I feel that Mark brings out my playing in a different way. He can play complex chord structures which really highlight and boost the stylistic nuances of the tune, but also sensitive accompaniment for slow airs...”



EP with clàrsach player and singer Eilidh Munro. Under the very appropriate moniker of The Eilidhs, they released *Ùr*, and its five tracks give a good indication of their live set – a mixture of Gaelic songs, newer songs and traditional or traditional style tunes.

“Eilidh and I met when we both taught at Feis Dhun Eideann (an organisation that promotes Gaelic music to children in Edinburgh). She is a Gaelic singer (National Mod Ladies solo winner 2013) and clàrsach player and I play fiddle and sing backing vocals. We have played concerts together over the past two years, including some gigs for the BBC. We released *Ur* (Gaelic for ‘new’) in May and it contains songs in Gaelic and English, strathspeys, reels and an ancient Gaelic melody we found in an old fiddle collection.”

The clàrsach, fiddle and voice meld together nicely on the EP, with perhaps the most beautiful track being the aforementioned

*Tha M'Aigne Fo Ghruaim*, from the Captain Simon Fraser Collection – a haunting air with soaring fiddle and beautiful accompaniment from the crystal clear clàrsach. Unfussy and uncomplicated, this tune is played just as it should be.

Eilidh also plays in a three-piece ceilidh band, Heeliegoleerie, with Mark and the aforementioned Allan MacDonald, and in Airlifted Dug, a band playing a fusion of Scottish traditional music with jazz and funk! But as well as playing in all these guises, she somehow manages to make plenty of time for composing – another of her great loves.

Over the years, many of Eilidh's compositions have been performed and recorded by different artists. For three months, she worked with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra on a composing project with two schools in Fife. The finished piece, inspired by the island of St Kilda, was performed in Edinburgh's Usher Hall. Eilidh is

dyslexic and she also composed a couple of tunes to help raise money for Dyslexia Scotland, a charity that strives to empower people with dyslexia to reach their full potential.

She teaches too. “I don't do a lot of teaching but enjoy teaching at week long feisean and fiddle workshops where you can focus on more specific things, or group work where you can develop arranging ideas with young people and get them inspired.”

With so many projects on the go and so much demand for her time, how does Eilidh pull it all together? “That's a good question!” she says. “I'm dyslexic, so time/work management is not my forte, but it somehow all works out. I enjoy the work I do, which helps me stay motivated I suppose.”

And that motivation is carrying her forward into a new series of projects in the coming months. It seems she will be as busy as ever.

“Later this year me and Mark's CD will be coming out, so we will have some concerts around that time and we are currently organising some tours for next year with our booking manager. I will also be performing some concerts with The Eilidhs with the Gaelic singing group Cruinn next April. I am also hoping to take some time to focus on my composing, with a couple of exciting projects on the cards (I can't say any more yet, but wait and see!).”

I doubt if life will ever be quiet for Eilidh Steel, but I have no doubt that wherever it takes her, she will go, fiddle in hand. It's the quiet ones you have to watch...

[www.eilidhsteel.com](http://www.eilidhsteel.com)  
[www.fiddleguitar.com](http://www.fiddleguitar.com)  
[www.theeilidhs.co.uk](http://www.theeilidhs.co.uk)  
[www.scotsfiddlefestival.com](http://www.scotsfiddlefestival.com)



# Live Music Local

## Find The Living Tradition at a venue near you

The best way to find out about live music in your area is to go to a local event and ask. A folk club or specialist music shop is often a good starting point for information. The following clubs, venues and shops are among those where you will find copies of *The Living Tradition* and people who will be happy to help. **If you want your club, venue or shop listed here please contact us at [admin@livingtradition.co.uk](mailto:admin@livingtradition.co.uk).** A full list of folk clubs can be found at [www.livingtradition.co.uk/folkclubs](http://www.livingtradition.co.uk/folkclubs).

**An Tobar**  
Argyll Terrace  
Tobermory, Mull  
[www.antobar.co.uk](http://www.antobar.co.uk)

123 Oxford Road  
All Saints,  
Manchester, M1 7DU  
0161 273 1000

**Edinburgh Folk Club**  
Pleasance Cabaret Bar  
Wednesdays at 8pm  
[www.edinburghfolkclub.co.uk](http://www.edinburghfolkclub.co.uk)

**Maidenhead Folk Club**  
New Inn,  
Maidenhead  
Thursdays at 8.30pm  
[www.redadmiral.freeserve.co.uk](http://www.redadmiral.freeserve.co.uk)

**Celtic Chords**  
8 Barclay Street  
Stonehaven  
[www.celtic-chords.co.uk](http://www.celtic-chords.co.uk)

10 St John's St  
Newport Pagnell  
Milton Keynes, MK16 8HJ  
01908 217217

**Falkirk Folk Club**  
The Tolbooth Tavern,  
Falkirk  
Thursdays at 8.30pm  
[www.falkirkfolkclub.co.uk](http://www.falkirkfolkclub.co.uk)

**Penicuik Folk Club**  
Roadhouse Pub,  
Penicuik  
Tuesdays at 8.00pm  
[www.penicuikfolk.org.uk](http://www.penicuikfolk.org.uk)

**Coda Music**  
12 Bank Street  
Edinburgh  
[www.codamusic.co.uk](http://www.codamusic.co.uk)

Polmorla Walk  
Wadebridge, PL27 7NS  
01208 812230

**The Fleece Inn**  
Bretforton,  
Evesham  
Thursdays & every 3rd Sunday  
[www.thefleeceinn.co.uk](http://www.thefleeceinn.co.uk)

**Ryburn 3 Step Folk Club**  
The Works,  
Sowerby Bridge  
Last Wednesday of the month  
[www.ryburn3step.org.uk](http://www.ryburn3step.org.uk)

**Dragon Records**  
5 Church Street  
Aylesbury  
01296 415333

27 Lower Bridge Street  
Canterbury, CT1 2LG  
01227 769484

**Folk At The Salmon Bothy**  
The Salmon Bothy,  
Portsoy  
Third Friday of the month at 7pm  
[www.salmonbothy.org.uk](http://www.salmonbothy.org.uk)

**Sunflower Folk Club**  
Public House Belfast  
Thursdays at 8.30pm  
FB Sunflower Folk Club

**Hobgoblin Music Stores**  
[www.hobgoblin.com](http://www.hobgoblin.com)

**Mill Race Folk Society**  
Cambridge, Ontario, Canada  
[www.millracefolksociety.com](http://www.millracefolksociety.com)

**Grimsby Folk Club**  
The Spiders Web  
Sundays 8pm  
[www.grimsbyfolkclub.co.uk](http://www.grimsbyfolkclub.co.uk)

**Swindon Folksingers Club**  
Ashford Road Social Club  
Swindon  
Fridays at 8.15pm  
[www.swindonfolk.org](http://www.swindonfolk.org)

1 Gibb Street  
The Custard Factory  
Birmingham, B9 4AA  
0121 772 7780

**The Bothy Folk Club**  
The Park Golf Club,  
Southport  
Sundays at 8pm  
[www.bothyfolkclub.co.uk](http://www.bothyfolkclub.co.uk)

**Herga Folk Club**  
Pinner Green Social Club, Pinner  
Mondays from 8pm  
[www.folk4all.net](http://www.folk4all.net)

**Tiger Folk**  
The Stumble Inn  
Longeaton  
First Sunday of the month  
[www.tigerfolk.com](http://www.tigerfolk.com)

36 Park Street  
Bristol, BS1 5JG  
0117 929 0902

**Cellar Upstairs**  
Exmouth Arms  
Starcross Street  
London  
Saturdays at 8pm  
[www.cellarupstairs.org.uk](http://www.cellarupstairs.org.uk)

**Irvine Folk Club**  
Vineburgh Community Centre  
Fortnightly on Wednesdays at 8pm  
[www.irvinefolkclub.co.uk](http://www.irvinefolkclub.co.uk)

**The White Horse Folk Club**  
The Forrester Arms, Beckside,  
Beverley  
Mondays at 8.30pm  
[www.whfolk.co.uk](http://www.whfolk.co.uk)

17 The Parade  
Northgate  
Crawley, RH10 8DT  
01293 515858

**Davy Lamp Folk Club**  
Washington Arts Centre,  
Tyne & Wear  
Saturdays from 7.30pm  
[www.davylampfolkclub.co.uk](http://www.davylampfolkclub.co.uk)

**Musical Traditions Club**  
The King and Queen  
Foley Street  
London  
Monthly on Friday night  
[www.mustradclub.co.uk](http://www.mustradclub.co.uk)

39 Call Lane  
Leeds, LS1 7BT  
0113 245 3311

**Downend Folk Club**  
Monthly in various venues around  
Downend  
[www.downendfolkclub.co.uk](http://www.downendfolkclub.co.uk)

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