

Talented trio from Shetland make Spencie's new tunes top drawer musical outing

- **Rich social and cultural record of North Isles life**
- **Playing marked by his trademark vigour**

December 12th, 2008

Steven Spence, Spencie's Tunes Vol 2. CD and tune book available from www.spenciestunes.com and local shops.

I have never come across a musician offering to compose a tune tailored to your whim in return for a modest wad of green-backs, but for Shetland fiddler Steven Spence from the UK's most northerly island Unst, it's surely his way of digging out and nailing down those bits of tunes that buzz around inside his head.

I'm not saying he's in it for the money because you'd scarcely get your car serviced for the price of one of his compositions and his creation is yours for life and even afterwards, unlike the Yaris quietly rotting away at your front door.

It's the musical equivalent of commissioning an artist to paint a portrait. Scottish traditional music has a rich history of tunes inspired by characters who crossed the composer's path so Steven has only slightly short-circuited and commercialised that approach.

There's nothing vain or egotistical about those whom his tunes are written for though because they are usually created as gifts, for weddings, anniversaries and for loved ones or favourite places. On occasion they are in tribute to an absent friend.

Taken together with the potted stories behind the tunes, the scores in the book with their mix of photos and some great cartoons by Frank Renwick, Spencie's Tunes Vol 2 represents a rich social and cultural record of early 21st century life in the North Isles.

But are the tunes any good or simply music-by-numbers churned off the Spencie conveyor belt?

Well, considering Steven wrote Sylvia, one of the most memorable tunes in Shetland ever, when he was just 14 and added the fizz to Hom Bru in their 1980s vintage, he certainly has the required pedigree. The playing dried up for a few years after he quit the band in 1993 but he got the bug again in 2004, bouncing back with the first volume of Spencie's Tunes which brought together his rich back catalogue of tunes from 30 years.

Steven is famed for his energy and the addictive secret ingredient he sprinkles on tunes, called "lift". He often gives the impression of being in a hurry and he certainly doesn't stretch his music by dragging behind the beat – he's always somewhere up ahead. He's not one given to the over-wrought melancholic tear-jerker either so there are no slow airs to be found on this

collection. The fast tunes are dispensed with his trademark vim and vigour and the backing throughout is alive and rootsy.

Steven told me they had put “contemporary” backing on some of the tunes which conjured a vision of electronic break-beats but there’s nothing too kooky that would scare off the traditional purists. Instead it blesses the album with a variety of textures – something many traditional fiddle albums fail to do, which can make the listening experience something of an endurance test.

Steven’s right-hand man Jonathan Ritch is an outstanding musician in whatever field he turns his hand to: rock guitar, Beatles a cappella singing or bass guitar with Fiddlers' Bid and Shoormal. He’s a discerning knob-twiddler in the studio too although for my tastes he should have tweaked his acoustic guitar a bit higher in the mix rather than relegating it almost to the role of percussion in the background at times where you hear the strings rhythmically strummed but not the sound of the chords.

The other main accompanist, the multi-talented Alice Mullay, is a Bigton lass who has shown great taste by choosing to live in Unst, Spencie’s “island above all others”. Her occasional flute playing is tasteful and well-judged while her electronic piano can be quite powerful, allowing a tune to swell up in a way that reminds me of a Canadian fiddle colossus like Barrage or our own supergroup Fiddlers’ Bid. On tracks like the Prue Reel set she lays a solid rolling bed of sound for the fiddle to skip along on top of.

So, the musicianship is top drawer; are the tunes exceptional? Thirty-six in under 48 minutes is fairly jamming them in and possibly by packing so many short tunes into sets Steven denies himself the chance to cut loose and fly off in whimsical directions with more creative arrangements, a chance he does allow himself on the evocative waltz Hildona’s Farewell after Alice’s lush piano intro carries us nearly two minutes in before Steven lays the first note on top.

Golden Goals at Da Gibby does not suggest a very inspiring tune, written for Shetland’s gold medal-winning Island Games football boys, but it turns out to be a top tune, coming on like a brooding Fiddlers' Bid/Rock, Salt & Nails epic before morphing into Calum Risk’s Bernadette’s Reel, which would sound good on accordion. In the album’s first set the tune Sandy Macaulay could also emerge as a Spencie great.

Some of the tunes are hot off the composer’s bow, like the outstanding Mr & Mrs Philip Goodlad’s Hegri Jig, written for the ex-BBC Radio Shetland presenter’s wedding in October. It is quirky and less conventional than most of the other offerings, with Steven sliding his finger up the neck to echo the familiar Radio Shetland signature tune, displaying a slightly more flashy and acrobatic side than is found elsewhere on the album. That could be my favourite track some days, but another highlight has to be the neat waltz Mavis Anne with its lovely flute harmony and if push comes to shove it takes my top prize.

As for classic tunes the stature of Sylvia, at this early stage of listening I don’t hear a clear contender but it will be interesting to see which his fellow fiddlers pick out to learn or record on their own albums in the future.

Characteristically, Steven is already battering onwards and has enough tunes from previous commissions to fill another album for this time next year when we will again get to see if greatness has flowed from his flying bow. Here's hoping for a couple of duets or more lovely string and woodwind harmonies.

John Robertson