

The Lone Star Swing Band

Biographical Interviews

Scene: The rehearsal room, a Tuesday evening in August 2009. After an hour's hard practising, there is a break and the band relax with a cup of tea and a Caramel Log – except for Fiona who has water and berries.



The Lone Star Swing Band, from left: Iain Tait, Duncan McLean, Graham Simpson, Fiona Driver, Dick Levens

- DUNCAN Okay everybody, we have to provide biographies for the programme, and I thought it would be easiest if I just interviewed you one at a time and got the main details down.
- DICK Can't you just make them up? Might be more interesting.
- DUNCAN I don't do that any more! I only write truthful stuff now: ask Thomas Fraser.
- FIONA So who are you doing first? Because I have to leave at 9.
- GRAHAM Me too.
- DUNCAN This is important!
- FIONA I know, but I'm knitting 20 weevils to raise funds for my fiddle students.
- DUNCAN Okay, okay.
- FIONA And some shrimps too.
- DICK Knitted shrimps? Potted shrimps. Knitted pot!
- GRAHAM Don't forget the ladybirds, they're the cutest...except for Fiona.
- DUNCAN Please! Iain, I'm going to start with you. Iain? Where is he?
- DICK I think he went outside for a fag.
- DUNCAN I thought he was being a bit quiet.
- DICK The bass player's always the quiet one in the group. That's why I had to give up bass. The instrument was fine, it was the terms and conditions: 'stands at the back and doesn't say anything.' Didn't suit me.



The back door bangs. Iain enters, smelling of fresh air and cigarette smoke. He looks at the others warily.

IAIN What's going on?

DICK The NTS are vetting us. They're doing background checks. Before you can be in one of their shows you have to have full disclosure. Come on, spit it out!

IAIN Does that include convictions that are officially spent under the Offenders Rehabilitation (1974) Act?

DUNCAN Listen, just tell me where you were born and all that stuff.

IAIN But you know all that.

DUNCAN But the NTS don't. Gimme gimme.

IAIN Born 1964. Iain Swanney Tait. Started fiddle aged eight. First big break was aged 14, being one of the 'The Two Fiddlers' in Peter Maxwell Davies' opera of the same name.

GRAHAM Ooh!

IAIN We toured to Italy.

FIONA Did you fly to Italy? I couldn't have done that. Not aged 14. I had a great fear of flying. They probably heard about that. Which is why they didn't have me as the second fiddler. Or more likely the first fiddler.

IAIN Thought this was supposed to be about me?

DUNCAN What about that punk group you were in, The Movies? I found a photo on the web of you looking like The Jam. Or trying to anyway.

IAIN Ha! Our career highlight was playing to 500 frenzied American sailors in the Albert Hotel in 1979. Then we all moved to Glasgow and kept on playing there for a while. Then I got into a Tex Mex band called The Colostomy Bags.

FIONA No!

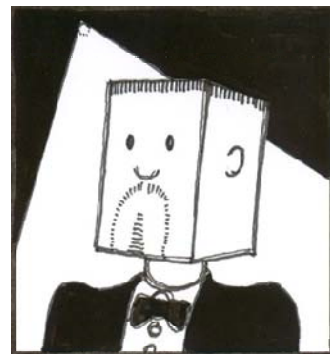
IAIN We were quite good! We had this great crowd-pleaser called 'Surfing Down the Clyde.' However...ha ha ha!

DICK What?

IAIN Not such a crowd-pleaser was...ha ha ha!

DUNCAN What?!

IAIN Ha ha ha! Half way through one gig, somebody in the band threw a two-week's-dead pig's head into the audience, where, according to the front page story in the following day's *Glasgow Herald*, it 'hit a vegetarian.' Shock horror! And I was banned from the student union.



Iain Tait

ALL Ha ha ha!

IAIN So I came back to Orkney, and was in a couple of heavy rock bands. We supported Echo and the Bunnymen, you know. And Dr Feelgood.

FIONA Who?

IAIN Got married to Sara, worked as a plasterer and builder, kept playing music of various kinds. Including baroque violin in the Orkney Camerata.

FIONA So do I.

DUNCAN We're not doing you yet.

IAIN And I'm the leader, Fiona, the leader, mind, of the Orkney Orchestra.

FIONA He's very good you know. You couldn't tell from what he plays in this band, but actually he's a very good musician.

DICK You haven't mentioned The Tribe.

IAIN Oh aye: Sara and I have three kids, Jack, Paul and Alix.

DICK No, the band...

IAIN Ah! I play bass for The Tribe as well as the Lone Star Swing Band. And I sing in a five part harmony group, the Nø Boys.

DICK He keeps himself busy, he's a busy boy. A busy nø boy. A busy nønø – hold on, wasn't he one of the Teletubbies?

FIONA Who are they?

DICK One of *my* bands...

DUNCAN Right Fiona, we'll do you now, cause you've got to go at nine. I hear the weevils calling.

FIONA I was brought up on the island of Hoy, and moved to Stromness when I was ten.

DUNCAN You weren't born in Orkney though, were you?

FIONA Neither were you! I moved here when I was one!

IAIN Bloody incomer.

FIONA I grew up there!

DICK Bloody white settlers.

FIONA Listen to that accent! Where were *you* born?

DICK Tunbridge Wells.

FIONA Where's that then?

DICK Just outside Stromness.



The Lone Star Swing Band

DUNCAN It's in Kent.

IAIN Bloody incomer.

GRAHAM And Duncan's from Aberdeenshire. Looks like you and me are the only real Orcadians, Iain.

IAIN Actually, I was born in Aberdeen.

FIONA Ah ha!

DICK Bloody incomer.

GRAHAM Ha! So I'm the only real Orcadian in the band!

DICK Bloody cheuchter.

DUNCAN Dick, I thought you grew up in Caithness?

DICK That's right, my father was working there so we moved up. He was building Douneray.

IAIN Childhood radiation exposure: that explains a lot.

DICK Then I moved down to London, swinging London. Wick wasn't very swinging.

IAIN Apart from the incomers swinging from the lampposts.

DUNCAN It always sounds very *Withnail and I*: supporting Manfred Mann and Hawkwind, squatting in Camden Town...

DICK Actually I preferred standing up to squatting... But talking of support acts, you know who supported us? Shaking Stevens!

FIONA Who?

DUNCAN Tell us something we don't know, Dick.

DICK Eh...some of my graphics are in the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

GRAHAM Did you give them to Victoria personally?

DICK McGonagall walked from Dundee to Balmoral to give a poem to Queen Victoria you know. But she wasn't in, so he walked back again.

FIONA Mc-who?

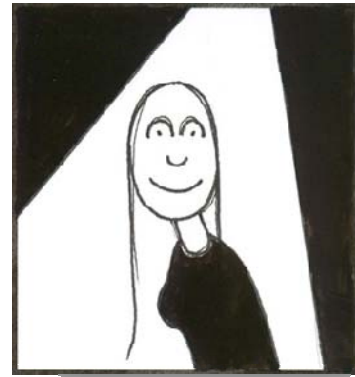
DUNCAN Will you *please* keep to the point.

DICK I am. You know our house was the old school?

DUNCAN 'Eventually I moved to Orkney, attracted by the arts and craft scene here.' I'll put something like that.

DICK William McGonagall went to school in my house.

IAIN Really?



Fiona Driver

DICK Really. His father was a travelling salesman – cotton or something like that – and they settled in South Ronaldsay. And he went to school in the very room where I have my workshop now.

DUNCAN ‘Dick is a renowned maker of quirky musical instruments, especially mandolins, but also the odd steel guitar and electric fiddle, including the famous Pizza Fiddle, which was very odd indeed.’

DICK But delicious.

FIONA You’ve got to mention the Smoking Stone Band.

DUNCAN They played at my wedding you know.

IAIN Really?

DUNCAN We wanted The Colostomy Bags, but they were busy.

FIONA Really?

GRAHAM The Smoking Stone Band was *really* the first Orkney band to take traditional Orkney stuff and mix it up with bluegrass and country and rock ‘n’ roll.

IAIN The first and the best.

DICK And back in 1996, a couple of years after Duncan’s wedding, he asked us to back him in a reading from his book *Lone Star Swing* in the St Magnus Festival. He’d read a few pages, we’d play a tune, he’d read a few more, we’d play something else. And he was reading about being a Scotsman in love with Texas music, and we were playing Scottish music mixed up with Texas and Tennessee and Kentucky music. So it all fitted together really well. He even sang a song or two...

DUNCAN And here we are thirteen years later doing the same darn thing! I must try and have a new idea one of these days.

GRAHAM So was that the birth of the Lone Star Swing Band?

DUNCAN Well, it was the conception of it you might say. I gusted with the Smoking Stone Band after that quite a few times, and then after they decided to take a break...

DICK Personal Organiser differences: Douglas had a Filofax and I had a Letts diary – caused a lot of tension.

DUNCAN ...so Dick and me decided to carry on, take the Texas stuff a bit further.

DICK Further than anyone in their right mind would have.

FIONA And you and I had already played together a few times, Duncan, remember we played ‘Milk Cow Blues’ and some others on BBC Orkney’s *Children in Need* show about, oh, 1995.

IAIN Back when you were a child prodigy.

DUNCAN You thought we were playing *for* Children in Need, and I thought you *were* a child in need, and we were doing it for your benefit.

FIONA I wasn’t in need!



Dick Levens

DUNCAN No electricity, no school, killing your own pigs for dinner...draw your own conclusions.

FIONA Well, we were self sufficient, and home educated. It was brilliant: I could play fiddle all day long if I wanted to.

DUNCAN I always thought that if there was a nuclear war, Fiona would be okay: she could build her own house, grow her own veg, kill her own pigs...

IAIN I could build my own house.

DUNCAN But you couldn't kill your own pig.

IAIN I could throw its head at the vegetarians though.

GRAHAM I'd just like to say, once you guys have built your houses, I'm available for painting and decorating: very reasonable rates.

DICK He plays drums with his paint brushes you know.

DUNCAN Right Graham, let's talk about you.

FIONA You haven't finished with me yet!

DUNCAN *(Sigh.)* Haven't I?

FIONA All I want is for you to mention my book of tunes and my albums.

DUNCAN Aye aye, two solo albums. Very good they are too. Especially the second one.

FIONA With excellent backing musicians. Just like this band.

GRAHAM Fiona! The Lone Star Swing Band is not your backing band!

FIONA Well, not officially.

DUNCAN Right, I am officially finished with you Fiona. Graham.

FIONA Not only is Graham one of Orkney's best drummers, he is also one of its best guitarists.

DUNCAN Shoosh! He can tell me himself.

FIONA He's too modest.

GRAHAM Shoosh! Okay, Duncan. I was born in Kirkwall, and I've also been interested in music. I started guitar when I was 12, drums when I was 13.

DUNCAN Who influenced you?

GRAHAM Buddy Rich.

DUNCAN Nice!

DICK Inventor of the Rich Tea biscuit.

GRAHAM And also Lars Ulrich.



Duncan McLean

FIONA Who?

DUNCAN Who?

DICK Who?

IAIN & GRAHAM He's the drummer out of Metallica.

DUNCAN *(Pause.)* I've got to go at nine.

GRAHAM Don't be so prejudiced! I thought you were supposed to have wide musical tastes?

DUNCAN I do, I do. It's just...hey, guys, you know on the tour van, we're allowed 20 songs each on the iPod? Totally free choice of course. But I think it's important that it should all be music that feeds into the Thomas Fraser style. You know, country, blues, a bit of jazz, a bit of Shetland fiddling. But heavy metal...not really a big influence on Thomas you know. So it's not allowed.

GRAHAM *(Starts a slow ominous thumping on the bass drum.)*

FIONA Don't worry Graham, he's joking. Aren't you?

GRAHAM I don't have to be here, you know. I could be painting a castle on Shapinsay.

DUNCAN I'm joking, I'm joking!

IAIN See when you say 20 songs, could that be 20 symphonies?

DICK Hello, Iain Maxwell Davies.

DUNCAN Listen, I'm going to get the director to sort this out. I've had enough: I'm just the flipping singer.

FIONA And guitarist.

GRAHAM And writer.

DUNCAN Okay, but it's not my job to tell you all what to do. Vicky Featherstone can do that. Now, can we get back to you Graham?

GRAHAM Yes please.

DUNCAN Okay, what was your big break?

GRAHAM Meeting Fiona, I'd say. My idea of paradise is camping and walking in the Highlands with Fiona. Best ever was hiking to the top of Ben Nevis, where I proposed to her.

DICK It's been *downhill* ever since! Ha ha! Joke!

DUNCAN I can't put all that in, for god's sake, this is meant to be *Long Gone Lonesome*, not Mills & Boon.

GRAHAM Well just put: Graham has always been kept busy playing with local bands in various styles, but no one wanted to start a swing band with him, so instead he sneaked in at the back of the Lone Star Swing Band half way through a gig at Matchmakers, and has been there ever since.



Graham Simpson

IAIN Which is true.

DUNCAN I don't usually like drummers, most of them don't swing. But I do like Graham, he swings like a...like an incomer on the end of a rope.

GRAHAM Which is ironic seeing as I'm the only non-incomer in the band!

IAIN & FIONA I'm not an incomer!

DUNCAN Milton Brown didn't have a drummer, you know.

FIONA Who?

DUNCAN Bob Wills did, but he made him play on a suitcase. In the early days at least.

DICK And the early days were the best.

IAIN The early days are always the best.

FIONA We've been playing together for more than ten years: what does that say about us? Our early days are long gone...

DUNCAN The past doesn't count. We've never really taken it seriously till now.

DICK Are we meant to be taking this seriously? No one told me.

DUNCAN I did, but you weren't listening.

DICK Another thing, you haven't told us your biography yet.

DUNCAN I did, but you still weren't listening.

DICK Did I miss much?

DUNCAN No: the best is yet to come!

A drum roll and crash of the cymbal from Graham, and the band retreat once more into the safety of practising 'I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire.'



Photo by Rebecca Marr. Cartoons by Dick Levens

www.myspace.com/lonestarswing