



Reed Ingram/Weir

KATHRYN TICKELL

Julian May looks at the extensive career of the award-winning Northumbrian smallpipes player who's become Sting's traditional musician of choice

"A LOT OF THE SONGS are rooted in that North-East modal folk tradition," says Sting, describing his latest theatre project and album, *The Last Ship*. "I wanted a North-Eastern folk band palette, so I recruited some friends from Newcastle... Kathryn Tickell, an extraordinary musician, plays the bagpipes and the fiddle, she's steeped in that tradition..."

She certainly is: Kathryn Tickell's great-grandfather and grandfather were singers and musicians. Her father, Mike Tickell, was brought up on a hill farm and learned songs from the traditional singers of the North

Tyne valley. He is well-known as a singer of Border ballads with expert knowledge of these ancient, monumental songs of love, battles, land, cattle raids and the supernatural.

AL Lloyd, who with Ralph Vaughan Williams edited *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* in 1959, memorably summed up these songs and the place and people that produced them: *'The bare rolling stretch of country from the North Tyne and Cheviots to the Scottish southern uplands was for a long time the territory of men who spoke English but had the outlook of Afghan tribesmen; they*

prized a poem almost as much as plunder, and produced such an impressive assembly of local narrative songs that some people used to label all our greater folk poems as 'Border ballads.'"

It is surprising, then, that Kathryn Tickell doesn't sing (at least in public). Instead she has been entranced by the instrumental tradition of the region. She learned tunes from the shepherd musicians Willie Taylor, Will Atkinson and Joe Hutton, and the great Northumbrian piper, Billy Pigg.

Tickell started playing the Northumbrian smallpipes when she was nine. These are bellows-blown, like the *uilleann* pipes of Ireland. They have four drones but, unique among bagpipes, the chanter – the pipe that plays the melody – is closed at the end. So a note is sounded only as a finger is

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raised, giving the Northumbrian pipes their characteristically perky staccato sound.

"It's like playing an octopus," she says. But Tickell quickly took to this intricate instrument and had won all the smallpipes competitions by the age of 13. When she was 16 she released her first album, *On Kielder Side*. In the same year, 1984, she was appointed the official piper of the Lord Mayor of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (an office that had been vacant for a century and a half).

On Kielder Side is a selection of lively jigs, reels and airs that, as well as Northumbrian tunes, includes some from Shetland, Ireland and Scotland. They are divided between the pipes and the fiddle, which she studied with the Shetland master, Tom Anderson. So, from the very beginning Tickell displays the musical openness and curiosity that distinguishes her career, leading her to unlikely places, for a folk musician, such as Sting's stage and studio. She has now played on five of his records. And that's not all. In 2001 she collaborated with saxophonist Andy Sheppard on *Music for a New Crossing*, which premiered when the Gateshead Millennium Bridge opened. She has worked with classical percussionist Evelyn Glennie, pianist Joanna MacGregor and The Penguin Cafe Orchestra. The composers Peter Maxwell Davies and Howard Skempton have written pieces for her.

In 1986 Kathryn Tickell embarked on her career as a professional musician, and released her second album, *Borderlands*, which included the first recordings of her own tunes. In 1990 she formed The Kathryn Tickell Band, with which she recorded and toured all over the world for most of the next two decades.

But Tickell is, clearly, not one to restrict herself. In 1997 she made *The Gathering* with guitarist Ian Carr and bass player Neil Harland. This album included some of the oldest tunes in the smallpipes repertoire, and her own recent compositions. By the time she recorded *Debateable Lands*, the title a reference to the contentious status of the border region, her compositions were growing more extensive. The track 'Stories from the Debateable Lands' is not so much a set of tunes as a musical suite. In 1999, with a bursary from the Britten-Pears Foundation, Tickell studied composition with Judith Weir, and wrote 'Lordenshaws' for smallpipes and a small ensemble. She also

formed Ensemble Mystical, which included among its instruments the *carnyx*, a bronze trumpet dating from 200BC. Tickell was also appointed as one of the founding lecturers on the University of Newcastle's Folk and Traditional Music degree course – the only course of its type in England.

In 2002 came *Back to the Hills*, in which she did just that, returning to the tunes of the Northumbrian tradition. In this year, too, she founded Folkestra, an ensemble for musicians aged 14 to 19, to pass on to them the music that shapes her life and encourage them to develop their own skills.

Kathryn Tickell has won the BBC Radio 2 Folk Musician of the Year Award twice (2005 and 2013). She received the Queen's Medal for Music in 2009. She curated the Percy Grainger Night at the BBC Proms in 2011, which also commissioned her to write a piece for the London Sinfonietta and the Hungarian band Muzsikás. The Bath International Festival commissioned a bespoke piece. The Nash Ensemble invited her to perform with them for Peter Maxwell Davies' 75th birthday...

Given all this, I suggest to her that she had not been content solely with the tradition she grew up in. Tickell puts me right, pretty firmly.

"I think that I'm still a traditional musician," she insists. "That's more the way you learn and how you see things. I don't think it is about the kind of music that's coming out. I'm very content with that, and I'm very content with the tradition. If I had just played that in the way that Willie Taylor did, that would be enough... but I'm curious, a bit bloody-minded and I can never resist a challenge. Even more, if someone tells me I can't do it, I will try, just to see."

So Kathryn Tickell is excited by her latest combo, The Side, in which she is joined by cellist Louisa Tuck, harpist Ruth Wall and clog dancer and accordionist Amy Thatcher. She thinks Willie Taylor, Will Atkinson and Joe Hutton would approve. Her latest album *Northumbrian Voices* includes the stories they told her as they taught her their tunes.

"The old traditional musicians, they were always open to whatever was around," she says then adds, ruefully. "It's just that it was all much narrower for them." ♦

➤ **PODCAST** Hear music from Kathryn Tickell on this issue's podcast

BEST ALBUMS

 **Northumbrian Voices** (Park Records, 2012)
Wonderful tunes, with stories from the musicians she learned them from, read by her father – 'The Northumbrian Richard Burton.' Reviewed in #89.

 **The Sky Didn't Fall** (Park Records, 2006)
The pared-down album she made in 2006, just her and the Scottish harpist Corinna Hewat. The title hints at the daring of this. Reviewed in #37.

 **Strange but True** (Park Records, 2006)
Interesting collaborations including those with Andy Sheppard, Catriona MacDonald, the Brazz Brothers and Folkestra. Reviewed in #42.

 **Air Dancing** (Park Records, 2004)
The Kathryn Tickell Band – featuring Peter Tickell, Joss Clapp, Julian Sutton and Donald Hay – in top form. Reviewed in #28.

 **Debateable Lands** (Park Records, 1999)
Not just a collection of melodies but an album with a strong theme that marks Kathryn Tickell's emergence as a composer rather than a writer of tunes.

BEST COMPILATION

 **The Best of Kathryn Tickell** (Park Records, 2010)
A double album of Tickell's prolific output. Reviewed in #68 it was described as: *'a fine distillation of a career so far and one that whets the appetite for whatever is coming next.'*

IF YOU LIKE KATHRYN TICKELL, THEN TRY....

Andy May
 **Happy Hours** (Fellside, 2009)
With several traditional tunes from Tyne and Scotland, Andy May's second album also features some fine compositions of his own and even some Galician jigs. *Happy Hours* demonstrates the versatility of the Northumbrian smallpipes in the hands of a gifted and enquiring musician.