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SALSA CELTICA

Graeme Thomson takes a look at the career of the fiery Scottish-Latin big band who get legions of fans dancing across the world

Coals to Newcastle is all very well, but it takes real chutzpah to deliver *cumbia* to Cartagena, especially with a uniquely Caledonian twist. When Salsa Celtica travelled to Colombia at the beginning of 2014 to play their first ever South American gig, it was the realisation of a quest that began almost 20 years before in the pubs of Edinburgh. The Scottish big band have since wowed Havana and New York, headlined Antilliaanse Feesten and the Las Palmas Carnaval, and finally seduced South America itself.

Blending Afro-Latin salsa with traditional Scottish and Irish folk might seem gimmicky, but Salsa Celtica offer so much more than a spicy main course served with a gratuitous bagpipe garnish. Their music is a natural fusion of whisky and rum, with song titles

that leap from Gaelic to Scots to Spanish as fiddles, harps, accordion, pipes and banjo weave among brass fanfares, lusty *coro-pregón* and slinky salsa rhythms beat out on *timbales*.

They formed almost by accident in Edinburgh in the mid-90s. A loose affiliation of Scottish salsa fans mingling on the local live music scene, their emphasis was at first primarily on Latin styles. Their ranks rapidly swelled as members of the local South American community, wooed by the promise of free tequila, were encouraged to jump on stage to sing and play.

Socially and musically, it was a period of natural cross-fertilisation. Sharing drinks, flats and gigs with friends like the late Martyn Bennett and Celtic fusion band Shooglenifty, elements of traditional music couldn't help

bleeding into the musical mix. Salsa Celtica's principal songwriter Toby Shippey recalls one particular eureka moment, when piper Fraser Fifield joined in with an early tune, 'Guajira Sin Sol'. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, that sounds amazing!' From then on we enjoyed playing with those two things. We'd do a couple of tunes like that and it was always a really exciting bit of the gig; you could feel the electricity in the crowd. It grew from there."

Following the release in 1997 of their first album, *Monstruos y Demonios*, Salsa Celtica headed for the source, travelling to Santiago de Cuba to spend time with legendary *son* band Sonora La Calle, soaking up the culture first-hand. You can hear the deepening of the connection on their second album, *The Great Scottish Latin Adventure*, released in 2000 and their first on Scottish folk label Greentrax. The album's highlight is 'Yo Me Voy', a frantic Latin gallop punctuated with skirling pipes, which became an unlikely hit in the clubs of New York and Los Angeles, leading to an invitation for the band to play dates in the US in 2001. Still raw, and not a little terrified, they nonetheless went down a storm, the tour culminating in a memorable concert at the

Lincoln Center in front of 3,000 raucous fans from New York's Latin American community.

Their sound further evolved with *El Agua de la Vida* in 2003, which reached number five in the European World Music charts. It's a fine album, but at the time Salsa Celtica were still struggling to fully capture the energy and sense of spectacle of their live shows, which had already established them as a go-to band on the British folk and world music festival circuit. In the new Millennium they became familiar faces at Celtic Connections, WOMAD, Glastonbury, the Edinburgh Fringe and Cambridge Folk Festival; in 2006 they performed a triumphant homecoming gig at Edinburgh's Hogmanay celebrations.

The same year saw the band take a step up in the studio. *El Camino* (2006) expanded their sound palette with harps, banjo, *uilleann* pipes and a more pronounced jazz element, while the list of contributing musicians grew to 22, including a guest appearance from Eliza Carthy. In 2009 they toured with another British folk stalwart, Julie Fowlis.

If things have been relatively quiet since the release of live album set *En Vivo en el Norte* in 2010, it's perhaps little wonder. With 12

core members and a 'floating' cast of extras numbering almost as many again, the band is a logistical Rubik's cube. Still primarily Edinburgh-based, the current line-up includes players from Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba, Ireland, England and New York. They tend to come and go, spending time on other projects before reconvening as Salsa Celtica.

The good news is that 2014 promises to be a landmark year for the band. Their sixth album, *The Tall Islands*, is out in February, coinciding with a UK tour in March. The visit was long overdue, the continent having flipped a few year's back for the salsa sound of Scotland. The band's Facebook page is flooded with South Americans, while their records have become party staples. On their last UK tour they were astonished to discover that two Colombian fans had travelled all the way to Sale in order to see them perform. Both literally and figuratively, this unique band have come a long, long way. ♦

- + **ALBUM** *The Tall Islands* is reviewed in #99
- + **DATES** See the *Gig Guide* for March tour details
- + **PODCAST** Hear an excerpt from the new album on the podcast

BEST ALBUMS

SALSA CELTICA *El Agua de la Vida* (Greentrax, 2003)
Once memorably described as the sound of Tito Puente cutting loose at a *ceilidh*, their third album contains the closest thing to a band manifesto in the stomping 'Cumbia de Celtica'. Reviewed in #18.

SALSA CELTICA *El Camino* (Discos León, 2006)
Producer Calum Malcolm brings a new clarity to a more ambitious range of material, from the jazzy 'Córrela' to Eliza Carthy's outstanding rendition of English traditional song 'Grey Gallito'. Reviewed in #35.

SALSA CELTICA *The Tall Islands* (Discos León, 2014)
A fully realised fusion that makes full use of the studio while the songs delve deep into the band's folk roots. Gaelic singer Kathleen MacInnes is among the guests. Read a review in the next issue, #99.

BEST LIVE ALBUM

SALSA CELTICA *En Vivo en el Norte* (Discos León, 2010)
Featuring a mammoth 14-piece line-up, which includes celebrated New York salsa trombonist Joe De Jesus, this captures the thrilling mix of fire and fluency that makes the band such a dynamic live act. Reviewed in #69.

IF YOU LIKE SALSA CELTICA, THEN TRY...

Afro Celt Sound System

Capture: 1995-2010 (Real World, 2010)
For those with a taste for Celtic traditional music given pioneering twists, the band's terrific 2010 retrospective is a good place to sample their trademark fusion of electronic, West African, Scottish and Irish music.

WIN

We have 3 copies of the new album, *The Tall Islands* to give away. To enter, answer: What Scottish city did the band form in?
See p5 for competition rules and address.