



Shooglenifty 2014 (left to right); Malcolm Crosbie, Angus Grant, James Mackintosh, Ewan MacPherson, Quee MacArthur and Garry Finlayson

# SHOOGLENIFTY

The Scottish boundary breakers first hit the scene 25 years ago. **Rob Adams** examines the group's distinctive sound and multifarious career to date

Composed by the prolific Anon, 'The High Road to Linton' is a popular session tune with Scottish musicians, said to describe the old drove road over the Pentland Hills, a range that runs south-west from Edinburgh to Biggar. Its melodic contours, however, might sound more familiar to musicians in an altogether different geographical location: Rajasthan.

It was while recently jamming with a troupe of traditional players in this Indian state that Angus R Grant, Shooglenifty's distinctive, bearded fiddler, found himself playing a local tune that was just a few

variations away from 'The High Road to Linton', which almost certainly figured in the jam sessions that led to Grant, percussionist James Mackintosh and guitarist Malcolm Crosbie forming Shooglenifty 25 years ago.

The original ingredients that went into the Shooglenifty sound included all sorts of styles, although any Rajasthani influences would have been unintentional. They might well be in there now, as during various different formations Shooglenifty Mk I, Mk II and Mk III (Ewan MacPherson replaced mandolinist Luke Plumb in early 2014 and Kaela Rowan sings on their imminent album *The Untied Knot*)

have assimilated music from everywhere on their extensive global travels. Yet they sound unmistakably like no one else. There's the bright staccato mandolin, a wild celebratory, singing fiddle, insistent drum beats, buoyant basslines and churning guitar and banjo rhythms, with an air of mystery hanging over the more atmospheric pieces and a party animal cracking the dance tunes into a frenzy.

"It could only have come about in Edinburgh and it was very much a product of the time when we got together," says Grant, who learned fiddle from his father, the left-handed Highland treasure Aonghas Grant. But although influenced by his dad's swinging style, which has the music of the bagpipes and the Gaelic song tradition coursing through it, Angus' tastes moved onto Captain Beefheart, the Fall, Brian Eno, Talking Heads and Miles Davis by the time he, Mackintosh, Crosbie and banjo player Garry Finlayson convened in Shooglenifty's forerunner, Swamptrash.

During the late 80s and early 90s Edinburgh was, according to Grant, where everyone came out of their ghettos. Folk musicians were playing with jazz musicians. Jazz musicians were forming folk bands. The young concertina player, now Scottish traditional music's ideas man, Simon Thoumire was discovering free improvisation. And round the large table at the foot of the stairs in the Tron Bar, all sorts of potent musical cocktails were being mixed, with Martyn Bennett among the mixers.

Grant, Mackintosh and Crosbie found their own table, in Christie's Bar in West Port, formed themselves into a trio and then went off busking in Spain. When they returned, they had the genesis of the unplugged Shooglenifty sound, which they expanded with Finlayson, bassist Conrad Ivitsky and mandolinist Iain MacLeod. They took up residency in La Belle Angèle, (later destroyed by the Cowgate fire in 2002), and when word

got out about the intoxicating spirit they were generating, they had to plug in to project their sound through the mass of people.

Eventually, some five years into their existence, Jim Sutherland, from Edinburgh's early 80s swing-folk quartet the Easy Club, locked the band in a studio and produced their first album, *Venus in Tweeds*. It very quickly became 'the talk o' the steamie,' as they say in Shooglenifty's heartlands. Fellow musicians coveted the tunes and someone came up with the term 'acid croft' to describe the music. The audiences who had flocked to La Belle Angèle were replicated at festivals around Scotland and then internationally as the Shoogle groove became a shoo-in for the late-night party slot.

From playing round a pub table, the sextet found themselves playing in rainforests and deserts, collaborating with Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Inuit singer Tanya Tagaq, and even starring at Sydney Opera House. When Ivitsky and MacLeod departed after 12 years, Quee MacArthur, a friend of Mackintosh's, and Australian Luke Plumb arrived seamlessly on bass and mandolin.

Extracurricular activity – Mackintosh has worked with Capercaillie, Mouth Music and the Michael McGoldrick Band among many others; Grant teaches at *fèisean* (Gaelic

## The Shoogle groove became a shoo-in for the late-night party slot

learning festivals) – has only strengthened the Shooglenifty sound, as have the aforementioned collaborations and jamming with musicians from all corners.

"You're influenced by what you hear," says Grant. "In the early days we spent a lot of time in Galicia and Asturias and I think a lot of the feel, rather than the sound, of the music from there fed into the band. It's a cliché to say that our development has been organic and it's another cliché to say that music is a universal language, but clichés are only clichés because they're true and we're still loving playing together. After 25 years, we've become like each other's brothers, only worse: wives!" ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Shooglenifty's new album The Untied Knot will be released in March*

+ **PODCAST** *Hear music on this issue's podcast*

+ **WIN** *We have copies of the new album to give away. To enter, answer: What's the name of the drummer and co-founder? See p5 for details*

## BEST ALBUMS

### **Venus in Tweeds** (Greentrax, 1994)

The group's debut that set the steamie talking still sounds just as fresh as it did when it was released. It includes the tracks 'The Tammienorrie' and 'Two Fifty to Vigo', a tune that's passed into the tradition.

### **A Whisky Kiss** (Greentrax, 1996)

There's a pastoral opening but the dance floor soon beckons as rave rhythms, Highland melodies and Middle Eastern moods meet in a strengthening sound.

### **Radical Mestizo** (Shoogle Records, 2005)

Favourite tracks including 'She's in the Attic' and 'A Fistful of Euro' feature in a live recording taken from gigs in Glasgow, Mexico City and Indiana US. The album captures the Shooglenifty Mark II line-up in typically effervescent form.

### **Troots** (Shoogle Records, 2007)

This album features judicious sampling, Inuit throat singing, guitar fills that range from bluesy to psychedelic, downright funky bass and steel pans-esque mandolin, which all come together in a swirling Shoogle groove. Reviewed in #43.

### **Murmichan** (Shoogle Records, 2009)

*Murmichan* is a double album that contains radical remixes, a guest appearance from Ensemble Kaboul, the 'Afghani Chieftains', and the pop-rock backing track of 'The Dancing Goose' but the band are still emphatically Shoogling. Reviewed in #65.

## IF YOU LIKE SHOOGLENIFTY, THEN TRY:

### **Paul Mounsey** *City of Walls* (Iona, 2003)

A Scot who lived in Brazil for many years, Paul Mounsey gathers Gaelic singing, fiddle tunes, *maracatu* drums and yearning keyboard atmospheres and transforms them into a gorgeous, emotion-swelling ferment for his fourth album, *City of Walls*.