

SHETLAND

SOUNDING OUT

Tim Woodall sails into the North Sea to discover why this archipelago produces such great music



Mareel, the UK's most northerly, not-yet-opened arts centre, stands out among Shetland's traditional stone buildings

The waterfront in Lerwick, capital of the Shetland Islands, is populated by fishing boats, ferries and ships servicing the North Sea oil industry – a scene of busyness in complete contrast to the surrounding windswept, treeless

countryside. The town itself is compact, with some grand public buildings and attractive stone-built houses. Come festival times, the town's capacity for live music mushrooms, with all manner of public and private spaces given over to 'sessions' – informal musical gatherings that are at the heart of life across the islands. Rightly famous for their hospitality and friendliness, Shetlanders love a good party. Live music is the traditional way this community comes together through the long, dark winter nights.

Shetland's folk music punches well above its weight internationally. Just 22,000 people live on the islands, but this beautiful windswept archipelago is home to half a dozen renowned festivals and an unusually high proportion of successful traditional musicians and bands, led, of course, by its fiddle players. There are further historical reasons for Shetland's distinguished musical prowess. The islands are undeniably remote – flights north from Scotland are expensive and the ferry from the mainland involves a 12-hour overnight crossing – but they have also been a stop on northern trade routes for centuries. Shetlanders went away on ships and brought back music and ideas, producing a cosmopolitan culture. The islands' mixed Celtic and Scandinavian heritage has, over the centuries, produced a musical culture distinct from either Norway or Scotland, the two countries

the islands lie equidistantly between.

The local style of fiddle playing, as championed by artists like the late Tom Anderson and Aly Bain, of *Transatlantic Sessions* fame, dominates Shetland's musical scene but not exclusively so. The accordion and guitar are also central to the distinctive local sound. Excellent music education and competitions like the Young Fiddler of Year keep music at the centre of life here, producing a technically accomplished generation of young artists who aren't afraid to build on the roots of Shetland music.



VENUES

Mareel

Due to open this summer, the quayside-based Mareel (left) will be Shetland's first modern arts centre. The new venue combines a 350-seat concert hall, two cinema screens and audio space. Its construction has been dogged with controversy, with local opposition questioning its cost and value. But Mareel (the word means 'phosphorescence on the ocean'), with its harbour-facing café, represents a smart alternative for live traditional music.

Gutters Gaet, Lerwick, www.shetlandarts.org

Islesburgh Community Centre

At the centre of musical life in Lerwick, the Islesburgh hosts groups like the Shetland Fiddlers' Society, formed by the traditional musician Tom Anderson 50 years ago. With an intimate hall perfect for concerts and dancing, and a central atrium for the more freewheeling, late-night sessions, the venue is the main hub during many of Shetland's music festivals.

King Harald Street, ZE1 0EQ, +44 (0)1595 745100, www.shetland.gov.uk/islesburgh

Town Hall

Lerwick's Town Hall is 'probably the best venue for acoustic gigs in Shetland,' according to one local musician. The upstairs hall in this imposing 19th-century building has a favourable acoustic and prominent stained glass window.

Upper Hillhead, ZE1 0HB, +44 (0)1595 693535, www.shetland.gov.uk

Douglas Arms

Several Lerwick pubs host traditional music sessions during festivals and the long, light summers. The Douglas Arms – known locally as The Marlex – is one of the town's regular music spots. Anyone is welcome to join in traditional music sessions on Tuesday nights throughout the summer.

67 Commercial Road, ZE1 0NL, +44 (0)1595 693787

Lounge Bar

The most famous of Lerwick's session pubs hosts traditional music sessions throughout the year. Apparently the late, great guitarist 'Peerie' Willie Johnson, a Lounge Bar regular, used to refer to the pub as his 'office'.

4 Mounthooley Street, ZE1 0BJ, +44 (0)1595 692231

Pierhead

There is plenty of live music to be found outside Lerwick. Pierhead, a bar and restaurant in Voe (a small settlement in the north of the mainland that looks out to a beautiful stretch of sea) hosts sessions in a cosy backroom space, and is well-known for its relaxed atmosphere.

Voe, ZE2 9PX, +44 (0)1806 588332

FESTIVALS

Up Helly Aa

Shetland's most famous cultural rite, dating back to the 1880s, Up Helly Aa (pictured) is Europe's largest fire festival, when Shetlanders dress up as Vikings, march through the streets and throw burning torches into a longboat. Music plays a vital role in ceremonial aspects of the event and the festival includes its own day of traditional music at the Garrison Theatre called the 'Fiery Sessions'.

Last Tuesday of every January, www.uphellyaa.org

Shetland Folk Festival

The Folk Festival is Shetland's version of Celtic Connections. Attracting international artists and bands, and with a diverse range of music on the bill, the festival is squeezed into one manic long weekend in May. It's notable both for being run by dedicated volunteers and for arranging gigs in Shetland's remotest areas.

May 2-5 2013, +44 (0)1595 694757, www.shetlandfolkfestival.com

For details on the *Songlines Music Travel* 2013 trip to the Shetland Folk Festival, call +44 (0)20 8505 2582

Fiddle Frenzy

Organised by Shetland Arts, this week of fiddling gives new and young fiddlers the chance to play alongside the islands' finest.

August 5-12 2012, +44 (0)1595 743843, www.shetlandfiddlefrenzy.com

Guitar Festival

The Guitar Festival is dedicated to legendary Shetlander 'Peerie' Willie Johnson. Influenced by jazz, Johnson developed a languid style of guitar accompaniment still prevalent today.

October 26-28 2012, +44 (0)1595 743843, www.shetlandarts.org

Accordion & Fiddle Festival

With a focus on traditional dance music, this festival hosts sessions all over Shetland, with playing and dancing until the early hours each night. It culminates with massive dance evenings at the Clickimin Centre in Lerwick.

October 11-15 2012, +44 (0)1595 693162, www.shetlandaccordionandfiddle.com



RECORD SHOP

High Level Music, a first floor shop in the heart of Lerwick, is packed to the rafters with instruments, accessories and recorded music, with a special focus on CDs by local traditional musicians and poets.

1 Gardie Court, ZE1 0GG, +44 (0)1595 692 618

LISTINGS

The daily *Shetland Times* (www.shetlandtimes.co.uk) is a must-read for music listings, plus the paper carries listings on its website at the beginning of each month. Also online, the website of Shetland Arts (www.shetlandarts.org) has information on local cultural life and www.shetland-music.com is another useful resource.