

FRASER NIMMO

Bob Battersby chats to a bastion of the UK folk scene, Fraser Nimmo, who, over a drop of Glenturret, delves back into his long and illustrious career

WORDS & IMAGES: BOB BATTERSBY

Back in the late 1960s, British singer-songwriters began to develop a distinctive ‘troubadour’ style. Drawing on human experience and personal observation, their songs had a narrative, ballad quality to them, combined with wry, subtle humour. Although still including American folk and blues influences, British traditional, jazz and classical themes frequently found their way into the melodies.

In the early 1970s a young Fraser Nimmo, armed only with a Martin 00-18 and a degree in theology, moved from Scotland to London and joined this burgeoning scene.

“We decided to move back to Perthshire a few years ago as my wife was unwell,” he explains, as we sit in his studio overlooking the Scottish countryside. “She sadly died in 2009, and my career took something of a backseat for a while.” Over a coffee, and later a fine Glenturret single malt, Fraser gives me some background on his career.

“I got my first guitar when I was 17 with some leftover holiday money. It was a second-hand Yairi, an excellent Japanese nylon strung instrument, although I hadn’t a clue about its quality when I bought it. I went into the shop and said ‘I want a guitar – what can I get for £14?’ and walked out with it.”

Like many teenage guitarists he played every waking hour, ‘The House of the Rising Sun’ being the first song he remembers learning because, as he points out, it has five chords, which was two more than most songs in those days.

“My pals thought me incredibly clever, the girls stopped regarding me as a bad smell and I started to get party invitations, so long as I brought the guitar! The fact that my guitar was nylon strung pushed me in an ‘acoustic’ direction so I got into anything folky. Scottish, Irish, American,

Contemporary, it did not seem to matter so long as I was playing.”

A couple of years later, using that same guitar, he did his first TV show, *Sunday Set*, for the BBC.

“The fee was 12 guineas (£12.60) plus five pounds, ten shillings and sixpence expenses (£5.52), so my first ‘big’ gig paid for the guitar.” Around this time the guys at his local folk club suggested that, for a more balanced sound when finger picking and a louder, more effective one when strumming, he try a steel strung guitar. This led him to buy the first of his Yamahas.

“I got it on hire purchase, as in pay the deposit then head for the hills, for £109,” he recalled. “My father was furious when the bailiffs turned up at the manse door for the money but he paid up and then calmed down a bit when I told him, over a melting telephone line, that it could have been worse. ‘What do you mean?’ he bellowed and, being a minister, boy could he bellow! ‘How could it possibly have been worse?’ ‘Well,’ I replied, ‘I almost bought a motorbike,’ (which was his worst fear). Silence. It was never mentioned again.”

To this day, when anyone asks him how to get started on the guitar, he always suggests two things: buy a budget Yamaha and learn ‘The House of the Rising Sun’.

In that vein, what were his early musical influences? “I was brought up in a household where Robert Burns hovered five feet off the ground and farted apple blossom into baskets of receptive rose petals,” he explains. “I loved the poetry but most of the song accompaniments were a bit twee and pianocentric.” In those early years he tried a few Burns songs on guitar, but it was not until Maartin Allcock introduced his ears to open tunings that he felt he had something original to contribute to the genre. “I still have the little notebook of tunings that Maartin painstakingly wrote out for me in the

early 80s when he was the instrumentalist in my wee band. When he left us to join Fairport Convention we all cried!”

His biggest lyrical influence back then was Tom Paxton, but, for pure acoustic sound, Ralph McTell’s playing on *Spiral Staircase*, with his magic touch and the percussive ring that he conjured up from his Gibson J-50, really had the ‘tingle factor’. Some years later Fraser bought a J-50 from Martin Simpson, who also taught him about plastic nails and superglue, but he could never get it to sound like Ralph’s. “Not even close,” he recalls, sadly.

Another big influence was Scottish folk legend, Archie Fisher. “He made a huge impression on me then and still does today. I first met him on the backstage stairs of the Dundee Rep Theatre when I was 19. He was carrying an old Gibson Kalamazoo, which he let me play before he went onstage to quieten, and then mesmerise, an over-refreshed, late night Dundonian audience... pure Gandalf. In those days I really wanted to be Archie McPaxton!”

After moving south, Fraser made a reasonable living playing the folk club scene in and around London until, quite suddenly in the late 1970s, a large number of clubs closed and he started getting cancellations.

“What I hadn’t realised,” he recalls, “was that ‘folk’ had been young people’s music and, at 28, I was no longer a ‘young’ person. Tastes had changed and we were getting booted up the arse by the younger generation of punk, new wave and new romantic bands. Twas ever thus.” However, around this time he did a gig at the folk club in the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields and, in the audience was Robert Earl, founder of Planet Hollywood, for whom he had organised a few corporate gigs. After the show he asked if Fraser would be interested in a more permanent

relationship and, partly because the money was irresistible, he agreed. Over the next few years he hired (and, on one occasion fired) some of Britain's finest folk performers – Maartin Allcock (Fairport Convention, Jethro Tull), Martin Bell (The Wonder Stuff) and Martin Simpson to name a few of many. It was steady work but, after several years of being tied to London, he felt that he needed a change and, having found a vibrant folk and acoustic guitar scene in Denmark, Germany and Holland, started touring there big time.

As the conversation moves back to performing, I ask him to elaborate on the playing techniques he has developed over the years.

“When I started, I could fingerpick with one finger and the thumb quite quickly. It took a few years to move on to two fingers and even longer to involve the third finger. I now pick with all four fingers and the thumb. The heel of my right hand rests on the bridge and I use a thumb pick and plastic nails secured by industrial strength superglue.

“Using your whole hand means you can be as sparse or as fancy as you feel you should be. You can also ‘roll’, which is creating a continuous stream of notes, within a series of chord shapes that follow the melody of the song. This can sound very effective and dynamic – particularly in DADGAD.

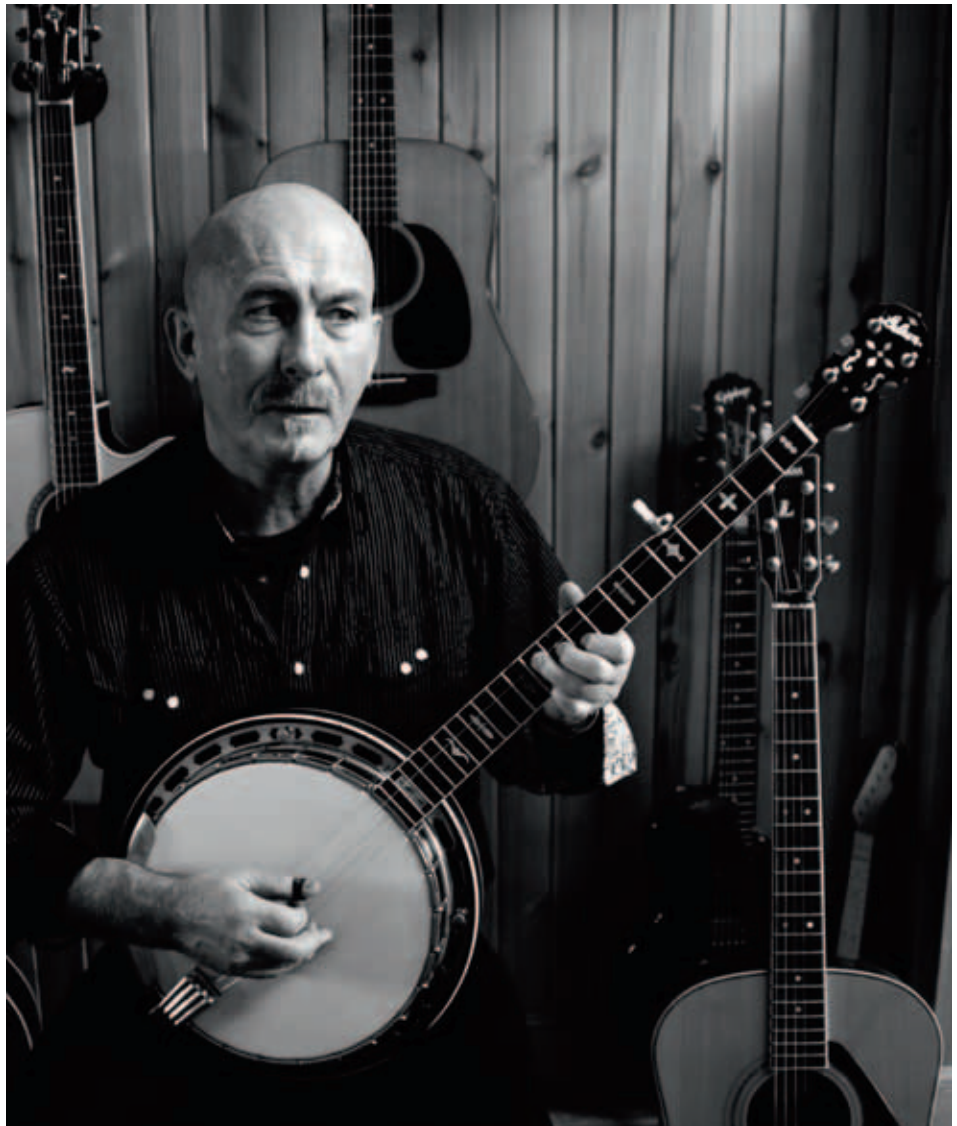
“My banjo style is totally hybrid – part bluegrass roll, two fingers and thumb with the third finger resting on the vellum for support – and part a kind of ‘frailing’, brushing my nails across the strings and picking out a bass-line with my thumb pick. I often make the purists frown by using both styles in one song – Appalachia and Kentucky in the same tune is considered to be banjo blasphemy!

“For live work I play a pair of oldish Martin D-18s (1971 and 1978) and use standard, DADGAD, open G and dropped D tunings. Both Martins have active ‘Headway’ pickups by John Littler – a fine English gizmo maker. They run through a four-into-one mini mixer and onwards to an original Fishman Aura edible pedal.”

Fraser heard James Taylor using this equipment live, when it first appeared, and he could not believe that Taylor could achieve such a fine acoustic tone and clarity with no microphone, and therefore no feedback. That was all the recommendation he needed, so he went and got one.

“It takes a bit of getting into, but gives me what I have spent my whole professional life trying to achieve – a pure, unadulterated, acoustic sound which can be as large as it needs to be without the monitor howling – the bane of an acoustic guitarist’s stage life.”

In addition, for solo gigs, he runs everything into a Yamaha Stagepass PA system, which he



finds is punchy, clear and much more powerful than its size would suggest.

“I also use a 1974 Gibson Mastertone Banjo with a Shadow bridge pickup. I bought this from Gruhn’s famous music store in Nashville after a three-day haggle ended with an exhausted salesman surrendering, a handshake – and then it was mine!”

For festivals, where there is often little time for sound checks, his set-up is simpler. He generally uses his Yamaha Compass CPX8 acoustic. This model has a built-in EQ and volume, undersaddle pickup and an internal condenser mic that gets mixed in. When used with a rubber soundhole plug, to minimise feedback, he finds it a very versatile instrument.

For writing he uses the 1956 Martin 00-18 that he swapped, in 1972, for his Yamaha FG340. “The best deal of my life – easily my most treasured possession. Mind you, the Yamaha had a nice case! It is quite the sweetest tool in my box.”

After the loss of his wife it took Fraser a few years to find his feet but, since 2011, he has been gigging again on a regular basis, playing clubs and festivals all over the UK. In 2012 he

returned to Denmark for a short tour and has been playing gigs from Gravesend to Ullapool since then. In 2015 he had sell out shows at both Celtic Connections in Glasgow and the Edinburgh Festival, played the New Forest, Weymouth and Cromer Festivals and did a first tour of Australia.

As the last of the Glenturret evaporates I ask him what he has planned for the rest of 2016. “I’ll be playing at the festival in Edinburgh again in August. This summer I’ll be doing some Scottish highland village halls, as well as the usual round of folk clubs and, in November, I’m taking part in The Carrying Stream Festival, also in Edinburgh, for the first time.”

Fraser is currently working on his next CD, his seventh, and every Wednesday night, when he’s not on tour, he can be found at the ‘session’ that he co-hosts, with local musician Roy Henderson, at the Bankfoot Inn. I can vouch for the warm welcome extended to players, singers and listeners – that Fraser himself certainly plays a part in. ■

Fraser Nimmo’s latest CD, *Best of Five and a Wee Bit Live*, is available at all good retailers or direct from www.frasernimmo.co.uk