

Davy Hutchison (1899-1975), Accordionist

Stuart Eydmann

I have been intrigued by this fine musician for many years and was delighted to stumble upon the recordings of him on the *Kist o Riches* website.

Back in the 1980s, I was given a Glenfiddich Living Scotland Award that financed a programme of oral history work with the players of the free reed instruments in Scotland. I was anxious that the accordion, concertina and mouth organ had been receiving little attention in comparison to other instrumental traditions and thought that something should be done to capture the testimony and output of some of the older players while we had the chance. This led to the compilation of a modest set of field recordings, most of which are now with the School of Scottish Studies archive awaiting digitisation and inclusion in the catalogue, to academic research and to the publication of articles on the subject. My ambition to pull this information together into the first book on the history of the accordion in Scotland remains unfulfilled, but I remain convinced that there is a good story to be told. There is certainly no lack of material.

In my research on the accordion I gathered a considerable number of old gramophone records and sought information on the players. It quickly became very clear the accordion has had a special place in popular and traditional music in Scotland for a very long time indeed. Among these records were those on the Beltona label by a David Hutchison. I knew nothing of the musician and asked around but still drew a blank. I filed the discs away and thought it was just a matter of time before I learned more. That is the way with Scottish music research.

I subsequently learned from Bill Dean Myatt, the great discographer of Scottish music, that Davy was born around 1900 (he suggests at Lornay) and had been given the name David Stewart. Davy

recorded 12 sides for Beltona in London in April 1931 and another 12 in Edinburgh around 1936. He is listed as 'David Hutchison, The Accordeon Strathspey King' - 'piano accordion solo'. His earliest releases were two years before Jimmy Shand's first records appeared.

Later still I received a communication from Davy's son who kindly provided me with a memoir of his father. This was followed by a second memory from one of Davy's grandsons. From them I learned that Davy was from a Traveller background. His parents were concertina players who, during the summer months, earned a living busking in the streets and at fairs and Highland gatherings. During the winter months they made willow baskets, which they sold door to door. Like his parents, Davy did not sight-read music but picked up and played tunes by ear.

Davy did not play the piano accordion as listed but rather the two-row button box. Scottish musicians were among the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of the accordion when it made its appearance in the nineteenth century, and as instruments such as the single row melodeon became more robust and inexpensive from around 1880 they were taken up in great numbers by working-class players across the whole country. From the outset these instruments were being used in social dance, bringing access to musical participation to a whole new group of performers. Instruments were never made in Scotland and came principally from Germany; the manufacturers were very clever in soliciting feedback from the players and retailers on the ground, which influenced the design of 'boxes' suited to local and national traditions. There were a number of technical innovations just prior to and after World War 1 and musicians in Scotland were quick to adopt these instruments with their greater range, smoother action, enhanced tone and volume and improved facility for left-hand, bass accompaniment. Competitions were held throughout the country and players such as the Wyper Brothers in Lanarkshire, Palmby Dick and James Brown of Edinburgh and William Hannah of West Lothian soon emerged as star players in dance and concert halls and on 78 rpm gramophone records. These musicians used the latest instruments and set technical standards and repertory for others to emulate. In the 1920s larger instruments, some with extensive bass manuals, were imported from Germany and Italy and the button accordion in its various forms,

including those with double and single rows, was joined by the piano-key version.

On the *Kist o Riches* recordings of Davy, he gives us an accurate, first hand description of the development of the modern accordion in Scotland which he had lived and played through.¹ The reporter, Hamish Henderson, is perhaps more interested in his Traveller lore and language than his music. He also tends towards the popular, urban view that the accordion is not a truly 'authentic' medium for the delivery of Scottish music and is, understandably, a bit unsure of how to respond to what he is hearing.

Personally, I like Davy's gramophone recordings very much but have come to love the three tracks in the *Kist o Riches* site even more than these, as the playing is more relaxed and less geared to the pressures of the recording studio and the demands of commercial release.² To me they suggest a glimpse into a world of traditional music unaffected by the mid-twentieth century strictures of the broadcasters, marching bands and respectable dance societies. His music is fast yet steady and would be excellent for an impromptu dance, public bar session or house ceilidh. As recalled to me by Davy's grandson Sandy:

We went berry picking to Blairgowrie in 1969, when I was 7. I remember sitting in the parlour of a local hotel one evening, drinking lemonade, whilst my grandfather played, and someone outside of the room before entering saying 'There is only one person who plays the accordion like that, and that's Davie Hutchison!' By the end of the evening the place was jumping. The other Travelling people treated him as if he were royalty. The MacPhees, Stewarts all claimed him as their 'cousin Davie', and welcomed him to sit at their camp fire.

The marches canter along at a great lick and the strathspey is more of a Highland schottische or fling. It would be convenient to simply categorise his playing as 'Traveller' in style but it should really be seen as part of a now residual, but once widespread, aural culture where music was often fun, lively and perfectly suited to the moment and offered without grace or formality. A similar driving style can be heard on other archival and gramophone recordings of fiddlers, mouth organ

players and accordionists from Scotland and of the older musicians of parts of Ireland such as Sliabh Luachra. It was only with the folk revival that a taste for such playing found its way back into Scotland's popular culture via the pub and festival session.

One of the great delights of the *Kist o Riches* is being able to take an unstructured tour through my musical heritage and, on this occasion, I'm so glad I did and that it led me to new perspectives on Davy, his voice and his wonderful box playing.

Notes:

¹ Track 74606.

² Tracks 74605 (Moray's Welcome), 74615 (Unknown March) and 74616 (Unknown Strathspey).

See also:

i) Track 74613/5 (dialogue on Davy's biography).

ii) Track 74606/3 (dialogue on Davy's biography and the accordion).