

# The Spiers Family

## *Plenty Brass & a Bonny Lass*

It is exciting to think that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a village Dominie (headmaster) and a Free Church Minister collected and put down on paper, 2,500 songs, many of which had more than one version, resulting in a total collection of 3,000 texts and over 3,000 tunes. These were not obscure at the time, but were embedded in the native culture of the rural area and had been commonly sung at home and social gatherings for years or generations. I am delighted that this CD brings a selection of songs from the wonderful “Greig-Duncan Collection” to a wider audience. Some of them will doubtless be taken up by other singers and become part of the popular repertoire again.

Scanning down the CD index I was pleased to see *Yowie wi the Crookit Horn* which was always one of my favourite stories. Attributed to a Kirk minister, it pretends to sing the praises and repent the loss of a favourite ewe, but is in fact a lament for the loss of an illicit still; the “crookit horn” being the cooling coil.

*Fan ither yowies louped the dyke,  
And ate the kale for aa the tyke, (despite the dog)  
My yowie never did the like,  
But bade ahint the barn waa”.*

In this track Tom takes lead vocal, accompanying himself on tenor guitar. His wife Maggie and daughter Emma add harmony in the chorus. Although Tom has made a number of CDs in his almost 50-year involvement with folk music, this is the first recording to include Maggie and Emma. Although Maggie has always sung at home, it is only in the last few years, since returning to Aberdeenshire, that she has been singing in public. She is now a regular floor singer at the Portsoy Salmon Bothy Folk gatherings.

Audiences of the Portsoy Players are more used to seeing Emma in the guise of Princess Beauty singing pop songs, than as a performer of folk song. However, throughout her childhood she was immersed in the traditional music of North East Scotland through her parents’ involvement with the Aberdeen Folk Song Club, where they met. Emma’s youthful voice suits the sauciness of *Johnny Sangster* and *The Wee Toon Clerk* and the romantic storytelling of *The Flower of Northumberland*.

Maggie’s choice of songs, *Marnan Fair*, (from Aberchirder) , *Bogie’s Banks and Bogie’s Braes*, and *Green Grows the Laurel* all share a positive attitude to romantic life. At this year’s Traditional Boat Festival in Portsoy, it was heart-warming to hear the children of Ordiquhill School’s spirited rendition of *Marnan Fair*, which they learned from Maggie. By contrast the comic song *O But I’m Weary* tells of a middle-aged spinster asking her mother’s help in finding a man! This, and other songs in Maggie’s repertoire come from recordings made by Peter Hall in the 1960s, of Mrs Lottie Buchan of Peterhead.

The title of the CD *Plenty Brass and a Bonny Lass* comes from the song *Greenland*, which is written from the viewpoint of a north-east whaler, *Aberdonians Fare Ye Weel*, which I had never heard before, tells of a soldier persuading his girlfriend to become a camp follower and join him on the march to the Banks of Clyde, probably to embark for the Crimean war.

A ballad I have know for many years is the tragic tale of Agnes Smith, known as Tifty's Annie, from the mill of Tifty near Fyvie. Tom very sympathetically tells the story of what we would nowadays refer to as "an honour killing" by Annie's brother, because she loved a man her father strongly disapproved of. This story is still remembered locally after 400 years and is in the repertoire of many traditional singers. There are so many versions of this ballad, I couldn't wait to hear which one Tom had chosen. It turned out that he had combined several, and adapted some verses to explain the story better.

Over the years, Tom has become known for accompanying himself on the fiddle while singing. Recently he has added the tenor guitar, which sounds to me like a lute and compliments the songs well, but still I am happy there are several unaccompanied tracks on the CD, which suit the songs in question. e.g.

*Fyvie's land are far and wide  
And they are wondrous bonnie,  
But I widna leave my ain true love  
For aa the lands o Fyvie*

The final track on the CD, also new to me and the only non-Scottish track, I now play over and over again. *My Flower, My Companion* is a song of parting and loss with a beautiful melody and harmonies which leaves you wanting more. I would recommend this CD to anyone interested in the traditional song.

(To purchase a copy of the CD, contact [tomspiers@aol.com](mailto:tomspiers@aol.com).)

Wendy de Rusett, Findochty.

TASC - Traditional Arts for School & Community