

Bill Livingstone's Northern man

A review by Colin MacLellan

On listening to the new Bill Livingstone production I was surprised by the depth and the intricacy of the diversity and the arrangements – why should I be? - I remember as a young man in Ontario in the late 1970's hearing Bill's City of Toronto Pipe Band, and immediately wanting to play with that group, which I did, even though I lived 250 miles from Toronto. I'd never played in a "proper" band before, far less in Grade One, but the two piobaireachd medleys, the Desperate Battle and Mackintosh's Lament did it for me. Those I believe were largely Jerry Quigg arrangements but it was for me the start of the complex musical journey taken by Bill which culminates in all of the ideas and innovations displayed in Northern Man.



The album, for me, is a compendium of the subsequent decades of the Livingstone musical experience of which we have all been touched and influenced in no short amount over that period.

Doubtless there's more to come, but the music here has all the facets of the traditionalist, the jazzman, the contemporary, the composer. It's an extraordinary mix of tracks which piques the interest always, and although there are enough influences to bend the mind of any musician, in reality there is hardly a gimmick in sight, because the music is always melodic. I listened to all of it many times, because admittedly there were a few items which I knew that I just didn't "get". I've been around long enough to know that forms music which one doesn't understand on first takes needs review before appreciation.

The standouts for me on first listening were the Bill Livingstone hornpipes, the original strathspeys and the outstanding vocal arrangement including the waulking song intro from earlier Fraser's work in the very poignant "Down by the Greenwoodsides". It's a beautiful arrangement, but if you listen to

the vocals it will bring you to tears, not the least because Bill can really sing. It's the track which I liked the most, and it has no bagpipes! There are influences in some of the material from RS MacDonald, which is a nice touch, because you'll find Bill's stuff creeping into RS's recorded work as well.

The flute arrangements and playing by Pat O'Gorman brings the connection back to the start, the days of the Cabar Feidh and also Rare Air/Na Cabar Feidh which as mentioned earlier is possibly the starting point for all of this material. This is especially good in the Parker Walk suite, I remember playing this tune in the 78th at Georgetown in concert formation in it's one and only competitive airing and I must say that this track proves the point that music evolves with age and ideas. Additionally, Doug Stronach provides a one - man band of musical backing throughout most of the tracks from which without the whole album would be distinctly diminished. His work is really masterful here. Throughout all of this however, the bagpipe remains the focal point – this is not pipes as backing, nor is it an attempt to have the pipe do something it is not suited for.

This album is a terrific production. In an hour or so Bill demonstrates the musical innovations which have been salted away from many years of musical experience. That's the point of it. It's his answer (I believe) to the somewhat limited scope of the solo highland bagpipe and perhaps also the of pipe band, because in this day and age the recorded repertoire of both has become exhausted. Call it what you like, it's a great achievement - if you want something which will make you think and appreciate, then this is for you. But, make sure you listen to it. A lot.