



Craig Mackay

SPOTLIGHT Julie Fowlis

Nathaniel Handy speaks to the Scottish singer about her commitment to the Gaelic language while also reflecting on her exploration of other worlds

“These songs are sung in a language that has been here for a thousand years. It’s very much part of this world. It belongs here, and yet, to other people’s ears, it sounds like it’s from another world.”

Longstanding connections matter to Scottish Gaelic singer Julie Fowlis. Yet her fifth studio album could be seen as something of a departure. It’s the first time she has recorded English language songs on one of her own albums – not one, but two tracks – as an artist famous for her commitment to her native Gaelic tradition, and it also features a track, ‘Camariñas’, in which she sings in Galician.

Yet on closer inspection, these are not the sudden departures they might appear as. They are the results of collaborations going back many years and reflect Fowlis’ considered and unhurried approach. She mulls on her musical encounters and brings significant pieces to the fore when the time feels right.

“I’ve always got a list of songs that I want to record,” she tells *Songlines* from her hotel room on the eve of the curtain-raiser for her

US tour in Springfield, Ohio. “It’s a to-do list of almost entirely Gaelic songs. Whenever I come to do a new album, I check the list and this time, by sheer chance, the first five songs all happened to be connected to the ‘other world’ [the spirit world of Celtic tradition].”

The appearance of this theme led Fowlis to the words of first-century Roman author Pliny the Elder: ‘*alterum orbem terrarum eam appellat*’ (they call it the other world). The resulting album – *alterum* – broods in the shadows and on the margins, a place where Fowlis believes connections are made. “It got me thinking about the worlds we inhabit culturally, linguistically, socially, and how we move from one to the other. This began as an album about Gaelic – the other world – and became an album about *other worlds*. And I suppose it’s as relevant now as it ever was as lines and borders are shifting.”

This atmosphere is emphasised by the album artwork, which Fowlis commissioned from acclaimed Highland photographer Craig Mackay. His dark, gothic style has Fowlis

suspended in portraits over sullen lochscapes and staring with blank detachment from beneath a headdress of barn owl feathers in images that conjure a Wilkie Collins novel.

Another new dimension to this record is Capercaillie co-founder Donald Shaw, who worked with a string quintet. “He has such an intuitive air,” says Fowlis. “He did the three main pieces with the string quintet and I had particularly wanted to work with Su-a Lee on the cello and Greg Lawson on the violin.”

It is yet more evidence of an artist stretching their wings. Fowlis released her first solo album *Mar a Tha Mo Chridhe* in 2005 (reviewed in #30) – the year Scottish Gaelic was recognised officially as a language in the UK. Three years later, BBC Alba was launched, a dedicated Gaelic channel. Today, the Gaelic scene is booming and visible across the Highlands and Islands with Fowlis playing a key part in this revival’s success. ♦

✦ **ALBUM** Julie Fowlis’ new album, *alterum*, is reviewed in this issue, see p53