



Craig Mackay

# Julie Fowlis

A leading light in the Scottish Gaelic music scene, the singer is also a tireless collaborator, as **Nathaniel Handy** finds out as he looks back over her career

For much of the 20th century, minority and marginal identities were shunned in pursuit of strong, homogenous states and a standardised modernity. On a recent visit to the Isle of Skye, I was told by young Gaelic-speaking islanders of how their own parents not only couldn't speak the language, but were actively discouraged from doing so. It was not spoken at home and in school it was punishable to deviate from English –

supposedly the language of betterment. Skye is now home to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – the only public higher education college where Scottish Gaelic is the sole medium of instruction.

Julie Fowlis – an alumnus of the college – is a one-woman symbol of the changes that have taken place. Hailing from North Uist in the Outer Hebridean chain of islands, this sea salt-flecked Atlantic identity runs deep in her veins. Her mother's family originally lived on

the Monach Islands (or Heiskeir in Gaelic), which is a tiny three-island chain west of North Uist with nothing whatever to protect them from the ocean swells.

Though she would softly, self-deprecatingly deny it, she has become a key figurehead for the revival of Scottish Gaelic. While an earlier generation of musicians formed bands such as Runrig (founded in 1973, the same year as the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig) and Capercaillie, and laid

the ground for the opportunities of Fowlis' generation, she has become a striking polymath – working with all the key musicians of the Scottish Gaelic scene as well as further afield in Ireland, North America and other Celtic regions; building a major presence as one of the most well-known solo Gaelic-singing musicians; and developing a parallel career as a broadcaster and presenter of folk music.

Brought up until her mid-teens on North Uist, Fowlis imbibed singing, dancing and piping almost as early as language itself. Like all children in the still tight-knit Outer Hebridean communities, she was immersed in the musical and creative culture to the extent that her path to music degrees at the University of Strathclyde and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig can appear almost inevitable.

It was while at Strathclyde that she met four musicians at the nearby Royal Scottish Academy of Music (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and formed the band Dòchas. While they released two studio albums to much acclaim, their second album was released in 2005 – the year everything changed. It was the year that saw Fowlis release her first solo album, *Mar a Tha Mo Chridhe* (reviewed in #30), and win the Gaelic Singer of the Year at the Scots Trad Music Awards.

If this was her coming out ceremony as a solo star, there was much more to come. She won the Horizon Award for emerging talent at the 2006 BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards, scooped Gaelic Singer of the Year once more at the 2007 Scots Trad Music Awards alongside Album of the Year for her second solo release, *Cuilidh*, and in 2008 recorded a Scottish Gaelic version of the Beatles' 'Blackbird' for *MOJO* magazine as she won Folk Singer of the Year at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards.

It was as if everything she touched was gold. She has since become co-host of the BBC awards, alongside Mark Radcliffe, as well as a regular broadcaster on BBC Scotland and BBC Alba – the Gaelic language broadcaster that was launched in 2008. Perhaps the crowning moment of her ascendancy – in box office dollars if not in musical terms – was in 2012, when she sang the lead songs for the Disney Pixar film *Brave*, set in a *Braveheart*-esque Scotland of US fantasies.

Such personal acclaim might give the impression of an isolated talent, but Fowlis couldn't be further from the naval-gazing solo singer-songwriter. Most fundamentally, her success story is as much the success story of her husband and musical partner, Éamon Doorley. The laconic *bouzouki* player has been at Fowlis' side since her debut in 2005, crafting their musical trajectory and

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threading together the sister cultures of Scottish Gaelic and Irish traditions.

Fowlis has also been accompanied by a core group of exceptional traditional musicians in her solo career. These include Duncan Chisholm, one of the finest fiddle players working today, renowned *bodhrán* player Martin O'Neill, and Irish guitarist Tony Byrne. She has also played and recorded with the finest traditional musicians from across the Celtic world, including Capercaillie's Donald Shaw and Karen Matheson, Gaelic singer Kathleen MacInnes, piper Michael McGoldrick, fiddler John McCusker, Planxty's Dónal Lunny and US singer Mary Chapin Carpenter. Fowlis is also about to embark on *The Lost Words Spell Songs* project (read more on p83), set to tour next February.

Fowlis has been a rich collaborator in projects that explore the margins and the spaces in which traditions and identities merge, including being part of Aly Bain and Jerry Douglas' Transatlantic Sessions on several occasions. But her work has often focused back in on her roots, including a multimedia project in 2011 on Heiskeir – the islands of her ancestors, a residency at the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches digital archive of Gaelic and Scots recordings and a contribution to the 2016 Decca release, *The Lost Songs of St Kilda*.

Most recently, Fowlis has developed the audio-visual stage show *An Treas Suaile* (The Third Wave) with fiddler Duncan Chisholm, to be performed at An Lannair arts centre in Stornoway (on November 9 and 10) as part of the centenary programme commemorating the tragic loss of over 200 men returning to the Hebrides on the *HMY Iolaire* in the aftermath of World War I. It is the latest example of her ability to lead and sustain a fragile culture and tradition with a sensitivity that allows other voices and other stories to shine through her own. ♦

♦ **ALBUM** *Allt* (with Éamon Doorley, Zoe Conway and John McIntyre) is out now and will be reviewed in the next issue, #144

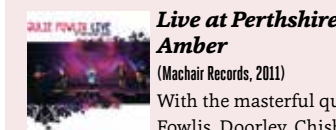
### BEST ALBUMS



**Mar a Tha Mo Chridhe** (Machair Records, 2005)  
The album that launched Fowlis on her solo career, featuring perhaps the most widely heard Gaelic song ever – 'Tha Mo Ghaol Air Àird A' Chuain' (My Love is on The High Seas), later used on the trailer for the Pixar film *Brave*. Reviewed in #30.



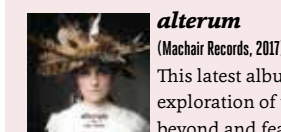
**Cuilidh** (Machair Records, 2007)  
The 2008 deluxe edition of this award-winning second album features a second disc of live recordings from that year's Celtic Connections festival, including her Gaelic language version of the Beatles' 'Blackbird'. A Top of the World review in #43.



**Live at Perthshire Amber** (Machair Records, 2011)  
With the masterful quintet of Fowlis, Doorley, Chisholm, O'Neill and Byrne, this hour-long set is a great opportunity to hear the warmth and conviviality of her live performances recorded at the Pitlochry Festival Theatre. Reviewed in #75.



**Gach Sgeul - Every Story** (Machair Records, 2014)  
Backed by her regular four-piece band, this is an unadulterated collection of pared down traditional Gaelic language folk songs, making a confident statement off the back of her Disney mainstream success. A Top of the World review in #99.



**alterum** (Machair Records, 2017)  
This latest album is an exploration of what lies beyond and features a duet with Mary Chapin Carpenter, an Annie Briggs song that is the first English language song on a Fowlis release and a Galician folk song. Reviewed in #133.

### IF YOU LIKE JULIE FOWLIS, THEN TRY:



**Undersong** (Make Believe Records, 2018)  
For sheer Highland and Island spirit and youthful enquiry that has the stamp of Fowlis about it, this trio of fiddler Lauren MacColl, harmonium player Jenny Sturgeon and guitarist Ewan MacPherson are hard to beat. Reviewed in #136.