

Dead Men rise in Stornoway show

by ELIDH WHITEFORD

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AUTUMN is approaching; a time when nature retreats and spirits awaken from their slumber; a time of peat smoke, winds and mist – and the long awaited debut album from Skye music makers The Dead Man's Waltz.

The quartet – Hector MacInnes (brother of dance magnet Mylo); Leighton Jones; David MacLeod and Magnus Graham – are more than just talented musicians however, as The Dead Man's Waltz have worked across genres and disciplines, devising musical theatre pieces and collaborating with film-makers and visual artists in a bid to create their own unique macabre.

"The theatrical side is borne from our desire to experiment with the unknown," says Leighton. "With the DMW we're looking inward...character-based pieces, darker tales from 20th century history that plunge head first into the sin barrel and come up grimacing. It's a Brechtian theme.

"I think it is all the more fascinating to explore and challenge our own perceptions through experiencing the world through the corrupt and derailed eyes of another. The Dead Man's Waltz is a platform for that."

And they've had it right from the start, expands Leighton. From staging the Vaudevillian murder musical 'Scary Love' at the 2008 Outsider factory, to creating the crazed Doctor William Johnstone who tutored as he walked through the audience of the Dead Men's 2009 art-house installation at the Now Museum, a disused abandoned ice cream factory in Partick.

In a previous life the four Skye born Dead Men combined as popular indie band 'Injuns', performing first in Stornoway at the 2007 Rapal live shows, before returning to play the Woodlands Centre as part of a Tune-up Tour with Claes Cem.

Described by Leighton as 'standing in our own little field, having a whale of a time and everyone else standing peering over the hedgerow scratching their heads at us', the initial musical experience – eclectic, experimental and hinting at what was to come – was something of a schizophrenic affair.

"There were two very different sides of our collective musical psyche at work; one which was designed to address the Radio 1 and T-break side of things, the other that just did what we wanted to, and came out draped in the darker romance that lean more towards The Dead Man's Waltz," he continues.

This 'strange form of musical self



The Dead Man's Waltz will rise again in Stornoway next weekend.

torture' saw the death of Injuns as the Dead Men danced into being, connected and inspired through their demise to create the self-titled debut album due for release on October 27, following single – 'Swings and Roundabouts' – out at the end of last month.

The first album to be a true collectively written and performed work by Hector, Magnus, David and Leighton; the 'musical chemistry' is a lot thicker than before as the record swells and seethes with a dual identity of their native Skye.

From the poetry of revered wordsmith Sorely MacLean to the rousing anthems of folk-rock giants Runrig and the stadium dance of Mylo; the influences of a rich cultural heritage, a place of bleak landscapes, the imposing Cuillin hills and ancestral memories of clearances and famine; the dark-eyed and slightly blue of skin gentlemen wraiths find their lyrical source material wherever there is mischief, melancholy, treachery and terror.

DMW's characters-pieces include the tragic tale of a U-Boat commander in 'Emmeline' and the eerie ambivalence of love-gone-terribly-wrong 'Cry On Me' as the album veers from lush piano laments with '1904' to the pretty acoustic folk of 'Swing and Roundabouts' and the semi-operatic, unearthly rollick 'Old Man'.

Looking at other storytellers, such as the subversive cabaret artists of Weimar Germany and louche barfly poets like Tom Waits, a thirst for creative challenges courses through the Dead

Men's gurgling blood – hence the album's release is, for Leighton, akin to watching fledglings fly the nest.

"I have developed perhaps an unhealthy attachment to the characters on The Dead Man's Waltz album. I've lived with them for quite a while," Leighton admits of the two year creation process.

"And now we've got to turn them out into the big bad world - it's like our children have grown up and are running away to join the circus. Except the circus is corrupt, the ringleader is an alcoholic serial-killer and the trapeze artist is giant fire-breathing spider."

As he sinisterly demonstrates the macabre imaginations that fire the Dead Men's 'folk-noir' that materialised from the ether to meld song, storytelling and film, it's clear that a chance to see the departed quartet in Stornoway next weekend should prove an exceedingly interesting evening's entertainment, not be missed.

Leighton adds: "We like not knowing what's going to happen and leaving some elements to chance. Musically I think this can be a lot more exciting, challenging and ultimately rewarding for all involved, particularly the audience, than say your usual barfly gig."

The Dead Man's Waltz will be performing at the Woodlands Centre, Lews Castle Grounds, Stornoway, on Saturday, October 15, and if you want to check out the ghostly goings-on before then, log onto www.thedeadmanswaltz.com

THE SCENE

I had a rather interesting... or most interesting... or whatever... text conversation last weekend.

It sorta went something like this: starting out with this text being sent to me or received by me or whatever...

"What's shakin'? Just listening to your fave band on you tube, haven't heard a bad tune yet"

Me: My fave band? Uh? Which one, from which period of my life, wud that be?

Them: "Ongoing, you're a follower". Which immediately flooded my mind with images of Harleys, Highways, Hippies, Billy (the Kid). The late great Dennis Lee Hopper (who was born in the famous Wild West town of Dodge City).

Maybe that's why he was always such a way-out, wild and wacky, groovy rebel character carefully modelled both in appearance and attitude on David Crosby the original California hippie of The Byrds - sand of course Crosby, Stills, Nash fame).

Wyatt Earp/Captain America (Peter Fonda's character), 1969, Easy Rider, the film, the original soundtrack recording.

The Notorious Byrd Brothers' with their psychedelized Country Rock version of the Gerry Goffin / Carole King penned 'Wasn't Born To Follow' and I was so tempted and so wanted to reply, 'I wasn't born to follow'.

But alas I knew the moment and reference would be totally lost on them so I texted back: Be a bit MORE cryptic.

The Black Crowes? Neil Young? who?

Them: "Black Crowes. Thought you'd know who you're fave band was. See why you like them. Remind me of all the tunes on the blow soundtrack".

So there's the rub - an insurmountable difference in reference points of about three decades and on and on and on it went.

Hmmmm? Yeah, and like I said, over my many years of musical listening, and through the many twists and stylistic turns that Rock n' Roll has taken me, I've had loads and loads of favourite bands and sonic obsessions.

Mind, I suppose I did follow the Crowes round the UK for three gigs this last summer.

Hmmmm? One of my many musical addictions over the years started in the early 2000s and came to me in the form of a mythical, legendary, local recording 'Sad Day We Left The Croft' that had almost vanished in to the ether, into extinction.

As there were only ever 1000 vinyl copies made, so deeply enthralled was I, that I made it my quest to go on an epic Odyssey-like adventure in search of the Holy Grail of Western Isles Rock music and exhume the lost master tapes and preserve the recordings for future generations on CD.

Done, dusted, a documentary on the "legendary punk album 'Sad Day We Left The Croft' (that you can view here: <http://www.moajatv.co.uk/productions/>) was made by Kenny Stewart's company Moja Ltd.

And during the journey I met two fine gentlemen - Neil Finlayson and Malcolm Burns, the nucleus of and currently a.k.a. The Drugs - a "legendary band from Lewis, formed around 1974/5, they were the first Punk band in the Western Isles and then the first synthesiser band in the Western Isles.

And then... The Drugs' sound has evolved and transcended itself over three decades. The Drugs think they sound like a cross between Howling Wolf n' Kraftwerk with a dash of Beefheart and a hail of Stones.

The original classic line up was Neil Finlayson (guitar, vocals), Malcolm Burns (guitar) Colin MacArthur (bass, vocals), Hugh McInnes (drums).

Going under various names including Revolver and The Bland before settling on The Drugs, they were the first band to record in Noel Eadie's Croft studio, and spawned the scene and the generation of new Punk bands which appeared on the 'Sad Day We Left The Croft' compilation album in 1980.

Others who have played in the band include: John D 'John D' Macleod (guitar - inspired composer of the compelling riff of the band's classic bitter love song 'Passions'); Callum Ian Macmillan (drums); and 'Peary' (bass, famously at the Castle Grounds open air show in summer 1979).

Also involved in the creation of the band were Murdo ("Tickler") Fraser (who made the band's first song 'Wedgwood Blue (Ordy-Ordy-Aw)' and Jackie Sparrow (guitar) who taught Malky to play".

Stolen from their thedrugs.blogspot.com ... and somewhere in there I ended up playing drums with them at a mad Mysterian party one Christmas (and no one even shed a tear, let alone 96 Tears...)

Demos kept trickling through the pipeline to me... the raucous, lovin' every minute of it, Captain Beefheart meets Dr. Feelgood, punkastic rave-up at the Beatles/Stones Tribute Night in the Woodlands.

And finally we have the gestation period of a soon to be birthed debut album entitled - 'The Sound of Electricity'.

What I'm finding most interesting about this is I've been privy to the very early pre-studio demos, the early July 2011 un-mixed studio version, the half-mixed studio version and now the September 2011 Mixes and fixes version and I'm totally enjoying hearing how this is all taking shape.

Eighteen tracks of the Drugs with hints of Punk, classic Stones, 60's Garage band, Beefheart and tunes that to my ear sound like mid period Meat Puppets and other experimental bands of that era and time.

Highly anticipating and looking forward to the finished version so I can do a more detailed presentation with artwork etc.

Got loads more local tunes to look at as well over the next wee while.

Until then... Rock it!

Jori

New category in FilmG prize list run down for 2011

FILMG, MG ALBA's innovative Gaelic online short film competition, has just announced its prizes for this year's competition.

They include Best Drama Short £1,500, Best Documentary Short £1,500 and for the first time a prize of £1,000 for Best Community Short.

It is hoped that the prizes, some of the best in the country for a short film competition, will act as incentive to get people involved in film-making and in particular the fantastic £1,000 prize for the Best Community Short will encourage grassroots film-making in communities.

This year also sees the introduction of a prize for the Best International Short for the best film in Scottish Gaelic from anyone resident in a country other than Scotland. FilmG is particularly hoping to capitalize on the interest in Gaelic overseas as well as the interest in digital technology in order to see more films being submitted by this group.

In previous years short films have been submitted from all over the world including New York, Alaska and Ontario.

In addition to the cash prizes there are also industry experience prizes. The winner of the Best Student Film for example will get a month's paid work-placement with a media company.

To be in with a shot at winning, all you need to do is make a 3-5 minute short film in Gaelic.

If you are not a Gaelic speaker, FilmG can provide support with translators and Gaelic speaking actors through our TalantG scheme. The competition closes on the 6 January 2011.

The competition is also open to young people aged 12-17. For full list of prizes and information on training see the FilmG website www.filmg.co.uk.

Screen Machine serves up Whisky Galore

THE return of Screen Machine to Barra, South Uist, North Uist, Benbecula and Harris will give film fans a chance to celebrate both modern and classic comedy as The Inbetweeners and Whisky Galore arrive from Monday 10 October.

Following its record breaking success at the UK box office, The Inbetweeners Movie sees all the regulars, including James Buckley as Jay and Simon Bird as Will, take off on holiday to Crete, where, strapped for cash, they attempt to have the holiday of a lifetime.

Meanwhile, one of Scotland's best loved films, Whisky Galore, is set to return to its roots when Screen Machine brings it to Barra for a special screening. A new digital print will be shown just 50 yards from where scenes were shot in 1948.

You can find more information on Screen Machine's destinations at www.screenmachine.co.uk/whats-on

Inspiring music aids charity boost

'FOUR of Britain's top chamber musicians came together on the Isle of Harris to explore and perform Beethoven's String Quartet masterpieces which encompass the whole of Beethoven's life' and with The Mission House Studio raised £3,000 for charity.

The worthy charities supported were The Leanne Fund, a charity which provides funding for special treats for Cystic Fibrosis sufferers in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland; and Children's Hospice Association Scotland (CHAS), a charity that provides the only hospice services in Scotland for children and young people with life-shortening conditions.

Piers Hellawell describes: "The Kyle Quartet Beethoven Cycle at Finsbay's Mission House Studio showed, yet again, the capacity of Harris to transcend its rocky shores and astonish those who think they know the island.

"To have one of the summits of Western culture presented, at the highest level, yards from the shoreline in a building rich in stillness and among the beautiful artifacts of Nickolai Globe and partner Beka Globe, is dangerously close to a sort of heaven.

"There are obvious practical reasons, but no greater ones, why these islands should not have their share of great performance arts, and these have been surmounted triumphantly by Kyle String Quartet and The Mission House Studio and with such guile and charm that one wonders why it has not happened before.

"Of course there have been, for long-term residents, performance occasions in Rodel Church and even in private houses - but one senses that this team means business, and business with proceeds in aid of important charities to boot.

"Any live string quartet performance of Beethoven is a battle zone, since strife and resolution is the discourse of the classical style: it was his achievement in the early 19th Century to elevate the quartet's four 'voices' to a plane where they vie, remonstrate, hurtle off at tangents and, just as suddenly, merge like lovers.

"For this very reason, to witness a fine quartet performance in an intimate venue can be dangerously like being a guest uncomfortably caught in a family row at a dinner party; art is not meant to be comfortable.

"So often, though, the collateral damage of this is fractured ensemble and dodgy tuning, for the medium of the quartet is exposed like no other in music, except solo singing: there is nowhere to hide, since 'playing safe' is fatal to the music's drama - yet to join battle is to court musical injury as the fur flies.

"We should be grateful but not surprised, since the richest of experiences find a good home here in Harris, if anywhere, in our fracturing world".

Heartfelt thanks to those who came and enjoyed the best play the best while supporting two very worthy charities.

For 2012 the Mission House are lining up some equally inspiring events visit their website for more details: www.themissionhouse.co.uk



Jaqueline Shave of the Kyle Quartet.

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