

Interview with Bobby Brown



Last summer the editor caught up with Scottish Canadian, Bobby Brown, leader of The Scottish Accent Scottish Country Dance Band, one of last year's nominated bands for SCD Band of the Year. Born in Dennyloanhead, near Bannockburn, Bobby emigrated to Canada when he was 16, like thousands of other Scots who left during the 50s, 60s and early 70s.

Did you have a job when you landed in Canada in 1957?

No. At 16, I was too young to start work. I eventually got a job in Eatons, a big department store, in Winnipeg. I worked there for about a year as a kind of office boy, then my mother came over to Toronto. We came back to Winnipeg and then finally went back to Toronto.

How did you get into country dance playing?

When we were still in Scotland a lot of musicians were friends of the family. My mother knew a lot of people – like Jim Macleod, Jimmy Shand, Bobby Macleod. I never remember sitting down and learning things. It just seemed to be part of our life. There was music in the house all the time and most of it was Scottish. My mother sang Scottish and Gaelic songs. My dad would take the fiddle out and play it. We always had performers coming through to see us on a Sunday. There was always a stramash on a Sunday afternoon. Robert Wilson was a good friend and wee Tamas Fisher, who played the piano. Will Starr was a good friend of my dad's. He was born in Croy and my dad was born in Slamannan, right next door to each other, so to speak! I don't ever remember learning a tune. I think a lot of natural musicians are like that. If somebody asked me when I learned a tune like *The Flowers of Edinburgh*, I couldn't tell them. I've just always known it!

So when you were in Canada, how long did it take you before you started playing?

I bought myself a wee cheap accordion. I hadn't played the accordion in Scotland. I took it up because it was impossible to find pianos where we lived. My dad had tried me on the fiddle but somehow I didn't take to it – although I love it. So I just started playing for wee things in the church and stuff like that. I actually went and took some accordion lessons just to make sure I had the basics right (not sure it was that successful!). When I came to Toronto from Winnipeg, there was a lot more going on. There was Scottish country, but I didn't know about it. My enthusiasm led me to play in little Country and Western bands. I played the accordion and piano. They were terrible, but it was an outlet for me – and it gave me a wee bit of extra money.

How did you get into a country dance band?

I met a drummer from Grangemouth called

Alec Martin. I had a friend who played guitar, so Alec said come over to the house one Friday night. This was in Hamilton, Ontario. We had an evening together. Alec said why not stay over because Stan Hamilton and Bobby Frew were coming for a rehearsal. They were just a trio at the time. They couldn't get musicians. So Stan and Bobby arrived. I had met them before through my sister Jean, who was an ardent dancer and teacher and very much involved in the RSCDS. I sat in with them – and I was still playing with them 20 years later! The Stan Hamilton band was a great band. I was second accordion. Bobby Frew was lead accordion. I used to jump in with the melody and play around, but the main thrust of responsibility was on Bobby's shoulders. Stan used to jump in and play the melody a lot too. That became a bit of a signature for him – a completely unique and brilliant player.

Could you sum up how Stan influenced you?

Oh, big time. I didn't know anything about Scottish dance music until I met Stan and Bobby. I was playing around the perimeter of Scottish music, but I had never been subjected to the dance band discipline. I knew about strict tempo and change of tunes, but I got a great insight into the chord formations with the band. When you're sitting with an accordion player like Bobby Frew on one side and Stan Hamilton on the other, you listen and learn. It's almost like an apprenticeship. The first year I didn't have a stick of music in front of me. I was just filling in and doing wee things. I think Stanley had the idea he wanted to do something like Bobby Macleod had done. He used chords rather than just playing the melody. Jimmy Shand had the three leads going – the two accordions and the fiddle. I think Bobby Macleod thought one of them was somewhat redundant, so he thought – let's do something else to fill in! I think that's where the second accordion came from, but I may be wrong. I never heard anyone playing second accordion like that until I heard Bobby Macleod.

So was the band playing exclusively for RSCDS-style dances?

Oh no, Bobby Frew was a great modern accordionist and Stan was great at it too. In

the 60s we did a lot of 'mixed dances' where you'd do ceilidh dances, quicksteps, latin american, foxtrots.

Was Stan's band in demand in Canada or all over North America?

Yes, we were probably the pioneers of the Scottish dance band sound over here. We weren't the first, but we played all over North America – Vancouver, California, as well as the east coast. The vast distances meant lots of travelling.

What caused you to form your own band?

I started to work a lot in the summer because Stan and Bobby weren't too keen. They would finish in May and not start again till October. I was a lot younger than them, so I started playing with old-tyme fiddlers and French Canadian fiddlers. Then I was offered a television show as the arranger and piano player for a group called the Cape Breton Symphony Fiddlers in Montreal as part of the John Allan Cameron Show. At the time I was working for a small company. I got to the stage where I couldn't get any more time off. I knew within myself that this was an opportunity not to be missed. It was the right decision because I ended up doing about six years of television. After that, I toured with the Cape Breton Symphony Fiddlers – even to Scotland and in Europe – mostly concerts. I was the MC so it was a real learning process. I must have done it OK because nobody threw anything at me! It was when my time with the Fiddlers was coming to an end that I decided to take up playing for Scottish country dancing seriously and form my own band. It was about 1976 and we called it *The Scottish Accent*. Bobby and Stan were still playing for SCD I think some people saw us as a bit of an upstart band! We were relatively unknown. I now have a nucleus of 8 musicians and if I didn't have them, I wouldn't have a band: Fred Collins from Dundee, Kathy Fraser-Collins, Rob Wolanski, Don Wood, Warren Beesley, Chris Reesor, Roger Moniz, and of course, my son, Laird Brown. They are the nucleus of the *Scottish Accent*.

When did you first come into contact with the RSCDS?

I was first involved with the RSCDS over here in the early 60s in Stan's band. Things were in their formative years. Hamilton was the biggest club at that time in this part of