



Canada. We used to play for their monthly dances and their ball. My first job with the band was the Hamilton Ball and I felt like a fish out of water. That's because I was! At half-time Stan came up to me, "Hey Booby, you're gonnae huv tae play louder than that!" I said "No Stan, I don't think so. If I play any louder somebody might hear me!" Then we started rehearsing and I began to understand the philosophy behind this whole thing – all the tune changes and stuff like that.

Were you ever a class musician?

No, not in the early years. Stan played for classes and so did Bobby.

When did you first meet Miss Milligan?

We were playing at the Hamilton Weekend, close to Niagara Falls, and she was over examining. My sister Jean knew her very well. We were standing in the gift shop and Miss Milligan walked in – probably to get some pan drops! So my sister introduced me, "Oh, hello young man," she said. "Very nice to meet you. What do you do? Do you dance?" "No," I said, "I play in Stan Hamilton's band." "And what do you play for Mr Hamilton?" "The accordion," I said. "Oh, I hate accordions!" she said. And that was the end of that! I said, "Nice to meet you too!" I never spoke to her after that. To this day I've always said if she had spoken like that to every young musician who was trying to build music in Canada, there wouldn't be any! She was lucky there was a band here at all – especially of that calibre!

She got on well with Stan, though?

Oh yes, they got on very well. She called him "Mr Hamilton". At these weekends, he would come into class in the morning with his eyes half open, a fag hanging out of his mouth, ten minutes late. "Oh, Mr Hamilton, how dare you?" "Oh, sorry Miss Milligan, really sorry." He would sit down and all would be forgiven – ash falling from his mouth. Then he would put his cigarette down on the piano! You could smell the lacquer burning. I used to come down to the class just to listen to Stan's music. I was amazed at the dexterity of the man. He'd hit an octave for his bass note and put a four or five-fingered chord in. It sounded like two pianos. When Stuart Thomson of the Wardlaw band saw Stan playing, he said, "I see it, but I don't believe it!"

I know you have strong feelings about original tunes.

Yes! I'm not so sure that this original tune

thing was the best thing that ever happened. I'm sure that a lot of the music in the RSCDS dance books shouldn't be there. A lot of them are anti-dance – especially the minor dirges of some of the strathspeys. There's a lot of them I don't think are very good tunes. Mind you, this is only my opinion! We all know that Miss Milligan's view of SCD was based on elegance, strength, accuracy of foot positions, and phrasing. To get all the footwork in, you have to slow everything down. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? It's a matter of opinion, but to say that this is the way the music was originally played wouldn't be correct.

But the earliest RSCDS recordings are much faster than today's, aren't they?

Yes, I have some of the early ones and they belt on! When I play at a dance I play faster than I do at a class.

So you have your class speed and your dance speed?

Yes, after we had recorded our latest anniversary CD, *Celtic Fire in the Music*, we had a launch party with about 80 dancers, dancing to the CD. As I was watching them, I realised that we would play it faster at a live dance. Miss Milligan used to come right up to a band and tell them they were playing too fast. She didn't mince her words, and if she didn't like the tune, she'd tell a band to stop playing that rubbish! I know that for a fact. It happened to Angus MacKinnon's band in New York. I was playing in the band when she came running up to the stage and gave us a real telling off, "You're far too fast, far too fast!" And if you think of the top bands in Scotland at the time – Jimmy Shand, Bobby Macleod, Ian Powrie, John Ellis, to name but a few – they were never asked to do a recording for the RSCDS! Why?

Things have changed since then. They've even asked this guy Bobby Brown to record!

Oh yes! As the first band from outside the UK to be asked, we felt very honoured. However, when I got the letter with all the requirements, there seemed to be quite a few restrictions.

Do you think some of the great bands from the past weren't asked to record because the people in control of the music were class pianists, not band people?

Well, perhaps. But I'm not sure if that was the whole story. I think some of the tunes they picked were rather academically

chosen – not for their 'dunt'. And today some of the stuff being recorded (not necessarily by the RSCDS) sounds more like yodelling music! It seems some of the tradition is being lost. I mean, what's Scottish about the tune for *Shiftin Bobbins*?

So should the RSCDS just have stuck to producing the text of the dances and left the music to the bands?

In my opinion, yes. They could have 'suggested' a tune, but they shouldn't have made it mandatory. I've never thought that was right and to this day I fight it. Teachers who are disciples of the RSCDS philosophy think that a certain tune is the only tune for the dance. That's what they've been taught. But many of the tunes are interchangeable. You can dance a reel to *any* good reel tune. Just look in the Miscellanies where Miss Milligan specified "any good jig or any good reel or any good strathspey"!

I've heard you play *The De'il Among the Tailors*. You wouldn't play anything else for that dance, would you – or for the *Duke of Perth*, or the *Dashing White Sergeant*?

No, I wouldn't. But I have old manuscripts for *The De'il*, and the original tune is *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*! Music wasn't always set in stone as it is today! If you look at my set for *The De'il Among the Tailors*, every tune is an original – *The Soldier's Joy*, *The Flowers of Edinburgh*, *Mrs Macleod*, *The Mason's Apron*, *The Fairy Dance* – all originals in their own right – great old Scottish tunes that make people want to dance.

Do you use originals as second tunes sometimes?

Yes, I think it's wrong to say that we can't use originals as second tunes. Basically, I play tunes that make people dance. Do you want a band that really makes you want to dance that plays really good strong traditional tunes or do you want a band that follows the book, but "the tune's no very good"! Some of the tunes we play were not originals when we first played them. Where is all this going to end?

And what about the arrangements of tunes?

We've got to be very careful with arrangements. We shouldn't play around with the tunes too much. Some people do some very flamboyant things with the tunes – harmonies and syncopation. I would never think of playing around with a good traditional tune. After all, good tunes stand on their own. I've been playing *The Flowers of Edinburgh* since I was a boy. It's a great tune