

– just leave it alone! As Stan and I used to say, it's not the chords you're trying to get in, it's the ones you leave out that are important!

I'm not a musician, but I feel if I can't dedle to a tune, it's not Scottish!

That's it exactly! Most dancers don't know about the music, but if you start to embellish our music too much, you lose it – especially with strathspeys. If you feel you have to embellish a tune in order to make musical sense, then something is missing. If you had soul for it, you wouldn't want to do that! If you remember some of the earlier books, there used to be two tunes given. What was the second tune for? In case you couldn't play the first one? Was it supposed to go after it? That couldn't be it because sometimes the personality of tune 1 is totally different from the personality of tune 2! You couldn't put them both together and maintain this little rhythmic journey.

What do you think of dances which are not 32 bars?

I don't like 40 bars! I've finished my wee journey after 32! Musically, I'm not fond of compiling music for 40- or 48-bar dances. Most tunes are written in 32-bar sequences. You play AABB or ABAB. For a 40-bar dance I arrange my music as 32 bars plus 8. That alone tells you there's something not quite right there. A 48-bar dance is more musical because you play ABABAB.

Then you must love *The Wee Cooper of Fife!*

That should never be danced! I shouldn't really say that! The song is a ten-bar song, so they use it for the dance, and then they want it 8 times! Where am I to find other ten-bar tunes to put with it? I've said to the dancers that I'll just play the same tune 8 times and when you get to the last time, ring a bell so I know I'm on the last lap! What most bands do is play 8 bars then repeat 2! How's that for destroying music!

One thing that a lot of traditionalists say is that they want a band to come back to the original at the end.

People say things like this to me all the time. They also say things like, "I couldn't dance *Mairi's Wedding* to anything else but *Mairi's Wedding*" to which I reply, "So you dance as first couple every time you dance it, then?" The whole thing doesn't hold water. It's all right if you're first or last couple, but the second and third couples never dance to the original! Certain tunes catch the dancers' ear. Go to any dance and play *Mairi's Wedding* and they're all singing along. I think Miss Milligan's idea of originals was to help people have an idea of the dance by the sound of the music. But if you were to ask a musician to play the original tune for *My Mother's Coming In*, we would have to go to the book! Even we don't know them all! There are too many.

I think the idea of second, third and fourth tunes was to stop people being bored by the same tune 8 times.

If you have to sit down and arrange an 8-times through dance, what is your ideal number of tunes and the order?

Generally, I use 4 tunes and play them as 1234234 then 1. And within the 32 bars, I'm a great believer that your first 8 bars sets up your second 8. The second 8 may look the same as the first on paper, but you don't play them the same way. It's varying the way you play the second 8 that lifts the dancers. If you're a dance band, you're there to play for dancers. You're not there to show off.

Where do you stand on the strathspey versus slow air controversy?

The Lea Rig was the first slow air to be used for a strathspey. This was radical to us in Canada – because it's a song. We've got a lot of strathspey tunes – most of them very good for dancing. Miss Milligan's philosophy depended on a strong first beat to the bar in a strathspey – strength, carriage etc. That doesn't happen in *The Lea Rig*, *The Duchess Tree*, *Mrs Milne of Kinneff*, or *The Dreamcatcher* tune. My own view is that introducing slow airs was a mutation and was not necessary. As a musician I play them – and I think we play them very well. Dancers love to dance to them and to listen to them. But they're anti-dance! The dancing starts to become slovenly. It's not being induced by the music and if you try to play *The Duchess Tree* as a strathspey, you ruin the tune. It's a song in A flat, but it's been changed to A. And that's another thing that happened in the early RSCDS books. The key of the tunes was changed. That's not right either. Leave the tune as it is. But we're not going to get rid of slow airs now. We're stuck with them. We now call them strathspeys, but they're not! We can't say to people, "Take your partners for a slow air sped up!" They're not unpleasant to play, but sometimes I am surprised by teachers who compile a programme with 4 of these slow airs and no real strathspeys. I remember one teacher who spent 45 minutes teaching the strong strathspey step, then the class danced the dance to a slow air!

What do you think of *The Irish Rover* as a dance tune?

If you end up fighting these things, you'll end up playing on your own! Just as bad is *Australian Ladies*. That's not a reel – it's a pipe march! *Let's Have a Ceilidh* is another one. If you get a bunch of pipers listening to us playing these tunes, I don't know what they think! If we played them as marches, you couldn't dance to them! You've got to speed them up. I don't enjoy playing them at dance speed, but if you get me at a party, I'll play them for what they are – marches – and I love them. Another example is hornpipes. People say to me that they want

a hornpipe after such and such a reel. No, they're putting in another reel! To play a hornpipe at the speed of a hornpipe you couldn't dance to it! So any hornpipes we play are up to reel speed. As far as I know, hornpipes aren't even Scottish! And if you use a hornpipe with a beginners' class you're inviting chaos!

So do you get into trouble with teachers?

Sometimes I do! I have had teachers coming to me telling me that if I don't play the original tune, they won't teach the dance! It puts pressure on musicians – especially those who are a bit more limited in their sight-reading abilities and their technique. Some less experienced musicians are terrified when they play for a class. We must bring new musicians in – not frighten them away. When I think of the great Scottish musicians, they're great, not because they're technical geniuses, but because they've got a feeling for this music. It's a mythical sense. It's your heart that controls the fingers.

Are you finding that more young people are interested in playing for dancing?

There seems to be more interest in the USA than in Canada amongst young musicians. In America, there's a lot of fiddlers playing. In certain areas the accordion is frowned upon as an instrument. Someone recently was running down the pipes to me. But it's the sound of the pipes that I am trying to emulate – all the grace notes and ornamentation. Like the pipes, the accordion is air across reeds. My formative years were rich in pipe music – the major influence in my playing even to this day.

Your band is a very exciting band to dance to. What do you do that is special?

First and foremost, I pick danceable tunes. We use a lot of light and shade. We use a lot of tension. We exploit the strengths of the tune – especially little runs. We're very rhythmic. Our bass line is very simple. When someone jumps up in the air in a pas de basque to one note, it's nice if there's another one waiting for them when they come down! Within the melody and the chords we extemporise, light and shade, maybe crescendo and then back off. We may go very chippy for 8 bars then come in strong for the next 8 if the tune calls for it. The music I choose is very harmonic. I stay away from lots of minor dirges. If I can't find a chord for something, I don't want it. My chords are ecclesiastical in their shape. I use a lot of suspended chords, which are very much in that mode. Plus I've got great musicians who have bought into my philosophy. We all love it. To travel the distances that we have to travel, you have to love it! I strongly believe a band is a musical unit.

(*Bobby Brown's latest recording is 'Celtic Fire in the Music', a double album with 27 tracks, ideal for class use.*)