

Stewart Fenwick's Review of the 2015 NNCCMF

This year's Caithness Country Festival, held in Halkirk over the Easter weekend, was another winner. It's easy to see just why this was the BCM Festival of the Year award winner last year. The event has set a standard which always seems hard to beat, but the hard working committee always manage it. Traditional Texan music has become a major part of the event over the years, and this year it was a major part of the proceedings.

Our first taste of Texas came from the lovely Amber Digby. Amber appeared at the festival five years ago, and was warmly welcomed back to the Highlands. She's the real deal. She delivered a pure Country set of songs like "It's a Long Way From Heaven", "Saturday Night", "If It Ain't Love, Then Leave It Alone" and "Houston Solution". There was very little chat as she delivered song after song. She did however introduce "Things I Wish I'd Said", as a song she had written with Vince Gill, and Justin Trevino picked up Vince's duet role on "The One I Can't Live Without".

It was Amber's band Midnight Flyer, which backed all the Heart Of Texas acts over the two nights. Justin Trevino was very much part of the band, but followed Amber with his own set, which included a whole lot of Johnny Bush numbers, in support of his new album. It was honky tonk heaven, as Justin sang numbers like "Texas Honky Tonk", "Who'll Be The First To Say I Told You So" and "Whiskey River". He also honoured legends like Marty Robbins on "Begging To You", and also delivered a wonderful version of "How Great Thou Art".

He involved his fellow Heart Of Texas headliners. Amber stayed on stage to harmonise, and later perform a number of duets including "Keeping Up Appearances", "Just Between The Two Of Us" and the wonderful "How's The World Treating You". Amber & Justin really blend together beautifully. Justin also promoted the Sunday night show, by bringing on Jade Stone, firstly to do a fiddle instrumental with John Schattenburg, then duet on "Once You've Had The Best", followed by a duet with Jeff Woolsey.

Saturday night finished with more Texan music, with a bit of a Bakersfield twist, in the form of The Derailers, who last appeared in Scotland 15 years ago at the memorable all day festival at the Armadillo, alongside Reba & JoDee Messina.

They gave us a very different show. It was high energy, loud, quirky, even corny in parts. Their over the top 30 second commercial for their website was different, to say the least. The musicianship was excellent, displayed in their marathon instrumentals, and Jerry Lee style piano licks.

Their programme included a wide mix, from the catchy "Right Place", to the honky tonk "Cold Beer, Wild Women and Cool Country Music", and the favourite, "Waltz Of The Angels".

There was more Heart Of Texas music on Sunday night.

First up was Jade Stone, who married 90's Country star Doug Stone just days before heading out on her first overseas trip. Backed by Amber Digby's Midnight Flyers, Jade delivered a stone country set, which included "I Cant Help It If I'm Still In Love with You", "A-11", "The Grand Tour" and "Big City", as well as tracks from her album, like "I'm Dynamite", "Honky Tonk Institute" and "Once You've Had The Best". She showed off her fiddle playing, alongside John Schattenburg again, doing some neat twin Texas fiddle tunes, including "Faded Love". She also performed a powerful version of her new husband's big career hit "I'd Be Better Off In A Pine Box".

Jade has a sweet voice, but a voice that delivered big traditional Country songs. Certainly, someone that I'm sure we'll hear more off, and just remember where you heard her first!

The final Texan in the festival line up was Jeff Woolsey. Jeff has been a huge Texas dancehall star for many years, but hasn't worked much, if at all, outside of the Lone Star State. Well, he's not a Texas state secret any longer. He had the dancefloor filled from the first note, to the last, as he performed favourites like "Wine Me Up", "If You Ever Walk My Way Again", "My Last Night In Town", "My Heart Skips A Beat", "I Can See It In Her Eyes" and a really good western swing version of "Release Me". He also featured Amber & Justin as part of his set.

For many, he was the star of the weekend. There was a raw unpolished feel to his presentation, which, I think, added to his appeal.

For many, James House was the festival's main attraction, especially, as his other dates across the UK had been cancelled. James is an accomplished songwriter, as well as a performer, having had a number of chart hits over the past 25 years. . On stage, he sang some songs that he was known for, like "Little By Little", "A Real Good Way To Wind Up Lonesome", and "This Is Me Missing You". The latter, he

credited to Yvonne Anderson, from Kilmarnock, who wrote the line dance to the song, for making it such a hit second time around.

He also featured some of the songs that he wrote for others, including "In A Week Or Two" (Diamond Rio), "Aint That Lonely Yet" (Dwight Yoakam) and "Broken Wing" (Martina McBride).

James was backed by a neat three piece band, which admittedly had a rather thrashy drummer, but it didn't detract from what was a superb set. He encored with a rather different arrangement of "I Saw The Light", which, I must admit, I didn't expect.

Trevor Loughrey was the first of the Irish contingent to take to the stage. Indeed, Trevor opened the festival on the Friday night, with a fast paced hi energy show, which included numbers like "Should've Asked Her Faster", "Mama Tried" and "Galway Girl". He did allow the dancers to catch breath, by slowing the tempo with "If Tomorrow Never Comes" and "The Cowboy Rides Away".

He announced his last number then sang another three, before earning an encore with "Wasn't That a Party". He certainly got the party off to a great start.

Anthony McBrien kicked off the Saturday night, with another lively set. His set included favourites like "Hello Trouble" and "Rolling on The River". The audience stood still as he sang a song about his late mother, but the highlight must be the rockin' version of "Fields of Athenry" which really had the crowd going wild.

The whole weekend was brought to a close by the very popular Gerry Guthrie. Fans changed into their Gerry Guthrie tops (and other items of clothing, I believe!). Opening with an uptempo version of Lee Greenwood's "Dixie Road", he kept the floor filled as he sang Country favourites like "Got No Reason Now For Going Home", "Rhinestone Cowboy" and "The Race Is On", alongside Irish fayre, such as "Say You Love Me" and "Locklin's Bar" as well as a Pop/Rock medley.

He did slow it down occasionally with songs like "The Dance", before encoring with "The Boxer", which he had already sang as part of his set.

European acts have always went down well in Caithness. This year, Rene Meier and Friends, a six piece band from Holland provided the continental fayre. There were mixed reactions amongst the audience, especially after their second set on the Saturday afternoon was identical to their Friday night programme. This isn't a new issue. Most of the American and European acts will be used to playing a set programme, so when they appear twice over the weekend, much of the material will be the same. Musically, they were quite interesting. Whist covering some well known numbers like "Stop The World And Let Me Off" and "Never Ending Song Of Love", they had their own, quite refreshing, sound on songs like "What I'm Missing" and "If I Knew What I Know Now". However, their slower numbers, like Neil Young's "Heart Of Gold" cleared the dancefloor. There's no doubt, they were a very talented outfit, but they didn't quite convince all of the crowd.

We all know that there's a lot of talent in the north. The only act that has played at every Northern Nashville Festival is Manson Grant & The Dynamos. This year, they finished off the first night. As ever, the guys had no trouble in keeping the floor filled with their showband style. As well as featuring three vocalists, in Manson, Keith and Brandon, there were instrumentals lead by Brandon on accordion and Keith on mandolin. And it wasn't just the locals who were impressed with the evergreen band. Texan Justin Trevino popped in on the Friday night to hear the boys, and talked highly off them all weekend, on and off stage. And he certainly knows talent when he hears it.

The Dynamos were back on Saturday afternoon, in the guise of The Country Side of Brandon McPhee, where the youngster took centre stage. He certainly has a great talent. He loves the Scottish accordion, in which he has excelled himself, but loves to sing as well. He performed everything from Cash & Haggard right through to Billy Ray Cyrus. For the Country sound, Brandon was supported by The Dynamos, as well as the legendary Crawford Bell and Davie Holland.

The Saturday afternoon set closed with Broken Note, a re-incarnation of the popular North East outfit, Broken Wing (maybe James House would've been interested in them). The new group featured Cy Mutch on drums, Pat Deegan, Mikey Sim and Ryan Petrie, and gave a really good account of themselves.

Norman Borland kicked off the Sunday afternoon set, supported by a full band. He delivered a good sound, and a well balanced set of songs, including "I'm Just Me", the title track to his new album (see our CD reviews), to "Loves Gonna Live Here Again", "Linda On My Mind" and "Thank God For The Radio". He also performed a number of Merle Haggard numbers, and a song called "The Outback Club", which he picked up on his time down under. I really enjoyed Norrie's set.

Sunday evening began with The Duke Boys, minus Nigel, who was stuck in his sick bed. They performed as a five piece band, and it was good to see Dougie Stevenson on steel and dobro. Led by festival compere George Malcolm, they gave a good show, well received by dancers and listeners alike. Their varied material included "Blue Ridge Mountain Girl", "Crying My Heart Out Over You", "Lodi" and "Good Hearted Woman", before encoring with "The Barmaid In The Honky Tonk Downstairs".

As ever, the kids got their chance to shine.

On the Saturday, Northern Lights, from Thurso High School, gave a good account of themselves, with covers of Carrie Underwood & Rascal Flatts, amongst others. The seven piece band featured Megan Cannop, Eilidh Harper, Andrew McGregor, George McGowan, Rowena McGregor, James Rollinson and Brianna Gordon.

On the Sunday, it was Rosie Fidler & Craig Chamber's turn. Their set included a slowed down version of "Chicken Fried", "If I Die Young", the well performed "Travelling Soldier", and "Wagon Wheel". The duo were previously finalists in a youth talent competition at the Belladrum Festival.

This year's festival addressed some of the past issues. Despite freezing fog on the way home after the event on both Saturday & Sunday night (we loved Amber Digby's Facebook comment), the weather was reasonable good, and the temperature inside the venue was positively warm.

Also, I've been critical of the sound in past years. Whilst, it'll never be 100% perfect, I've certainly no complaints about the sound this year. There were some changes regarding food service and transport, but don't think it bothered folk too much.

However, it was noticeable that numbers were down a bit on previous years. It was suggested that the locals weren't out in force as strong. Certainly I noticed a number of faces missing from farther afield this year. Whatever the reason, you missed a great weekend. Hopefully the collective absences haven't put the events' viability into question.

The festival has developed its own fringe events. Neon's pre festival night at The Royal Hotel is now well established, and this year, there was also a Sunday morning church service organised independently of the festival. BBC Alba were back again this year, so we can look out for some fresh Ceol Country programmes later in the year.

And hopefully, we'll all meet up again next Easter. Mark March 25th-27th in your diary now.