

PHIL CUNNINGHAM BIOGRAPHY

By Alastair Clark, November 2007

Superb, innovative instrumentalist, with not simply the fastest fingers in the West but some of the most sensitive ones, too! The man who, in Scotland at least, made the accordion respectable again and also plays fine keyboard and whistle; composer, whose range extends from heart-tugging slow airs to vibrant tunes for a string of successful theatrical productions and to full-scale concert suites, where bagpipes, bodhrans and bouzoukis meet up with sometimes bemused classical orchestras in a whirlpool of rampant, exuberant sound; powerhouse behind two innovative and hugely influential bands, Silly Wizard and Relativity; television and radio presenter, producer and director, involved in some of the seminal programmes that have enabled Scottish music to walk tall; record producer, responsible for many must-have albums; unfailingly affable, world-travelling ambassador for traditional music; humorist, whose breezy banter can have a 2000-seat hall falling about in the aisles; unfailingly patient, inspiring and witty musical partner of the great Shetland fiddler, Aly Bain; winner of countless music awards, including a writer's Grammy and, with Bonnie Raitt, multiple gold, silver and platinum albums; teacher, who not only helps young people but was on one occasion called in to give David Essex a singing lesson; Doctor of the University of Stirling, Member of the Order of the British Empire... where the hell do you start with Phil Cunningham?

Perhaps at school - Portobello High, in Edinburgh. It was there that the gauntlet was thrown down. Although he had been the star violinist in the class of 1974, and had been studying classical music on the accordion, his departure at the age of 16 delighted the music teacher, who told him: "You're a waster, just like your brother. You'll do nothing, and go nowhere."

Phil never forgot that. And, as his musical career increasingly took him to faraway places, never forgot to send the teacher a postcard. "Dear Sir. Here I am in Bermuda. Where are you?"

Where Phil Cunningham is now is just about everywhere. He has recently completed Secret Scots, a series of radio interviews with world-famous names who have Scottish roots including the business icon Steve Forbes and, somewhat more surprisingly, General John de Chastelain.

He has just finished working as presenter on a major new series for BBC TV called Scotland's Music with Phil Cunningham. It's 6 one hour documentaries which explore what's under the bonnet of Scotland's music.

He is still composing, still producing records, still touring extensively with Aly Bain, still baffling his pals with his conjuring tricks, still being the irrepressible Phil.

It all really started with Silly Wizard. Phil had harboured dreams of becoming a zoologist and he remains besotted with wildlife, from the tiny birds that come to feed in his country garden near South Queensferry to the elephants of Africa and the giants of the oceans. But instead of wildlife it was more a case of wild life when, after leaving school, he teamed up in Silly Wizard with elder brother John (now, sadly, no longer with us). The band were already taking Scotland by storm with their energetic, no-holds-barred approach to traditional music, and Phil's well-honed technical ability enabled him to cope with the kind of breakneck tempos for jigs and reels that they revelled in. But Phil, like fiddler John, was much more than a speed merchant, and in 1980 they demonstrated their more thoughtful side in a joint album, *Against the Storm*. Then came Phil's first solo album, *Airs and Graces*. Later in the mid-1980s, while still with Silly Wizard, Phil made his mark on America when he joined John in two albums by Relativity, a Scots-Irish quartet that also included Triona Ni Dhomhnaill and Michael O Dhomhnaill.

But yet another door was about to open - television. In 1986, Aly Bain asked Phil to join him in a new series, *Aly Bain and Friends*. It was the start not only of Phil's television career but also a partnership that has endured until this day. Aly and Phil went on to record an album, *The Pearl*, featuring some of Phil's compositions, and have recorded and toured together tirelessly since then, mainly in Scotland, but also throughout Europe and the US. They have become the mainstay of BBC TV's annual Hogmanay show in Edinburgh, which reaches a worldwide audience, and are at the top of every list when a special occasion in Scotland demands special music - for example, they performed at the opening of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999 and later the funeral of the hugely respected First Minister, Donald Dewar - the nearest thing to a state funeral that Scotland has seen in centuries.

In 1990, Phil added yet another string to his bow. He was commissioned by Bill Bryden to be musical director and, with John Tams, write the music for an epic, large-scale theatrical production, *The Ship*. He worked with Bryden on a later production, *The Big Picnic*.

Meanwhile, Phil had become increasingly involved in the recording studio, producing work by other artists or collaborating with them. The list here is a lengthy one, but it includes (in addition to Bonnie Raitt and her phenomenally successful album *Luck of the Draw*), *Cherish the Ladies*, *Eddi Reader*, *Dolores Keane*, *Altan*, *Connie Dover* and *Wolfstone*. He has also worked with the likes of *James Taylor*, *Rosanne Cash* and *Midge Ure*. When David Essex decided that he wanted to sing Burns' *Ae Fond Kiss* on a New Years eve music special, Phil was asked to coach him through it. David sang a gloriously poignant version of the song.. cockney accent and all!

Writing music for television and films has been another major activity. Phil's work can be heard in such classics as the BBC remake of *Para Handy* it required no fewer than 167 pieces of original music, albeit some of them only two seconds long, and the movie *Last of the Mohicans*, starring *Daniel Day Lewis*. His music has also been heard on some major American TV shows, including *Dr Quinn Medicine Woman*, *Walker Texas Ranger*, *Good Morning America* and *General Hospital*.

He has been much in demand, too, as a radio presenter, notably for the weekly BBC Scotland programme *Live at the Lemon Tree*, and *Cunningham and Co* broadcast from Aberdeen.

Perhaps his biggest challenge in such a diverse, hectic musical career was to write *The Highlands and Islands Suite*, a Scottish Arts Council-backed composition built to epic proportions and performed by a 150-strong assembly of musicians and singers in Glasgow in 1996. It was an unforgettable experience, and possibly one that, because of the huge numbers and organisation involved, can never be repeated. Perhaps not for the first time, it must have had Phil's old music teacher turning in his grave, and a headline in *The Scotsman* picked up this point neatly: "*Suite Revenge*".

Who knows where this lifelong, and hugely creative, quest for retribution will take Phil Cunningham next?