

## ‘HALFWAY’ ISLAND

The Creative Expression of Identity Markers within *The Band From Rockall* project

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### Abstract

This article explores island identity and identity markers through a case study of a musical and audio-visual project entitled *The Band from Rockall* (2012) by Scottish songwriters Calum and Rory Macdonald (co-founders of successful Celtic-Rock group Runrig in 1973). *The Band From Rockall* was inspired by the Macdonald brothers' experiences growing up in the Hebrides during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when North American rock and roll began to impact strongly on local Gaelic culture. The tiny rocky outcrop of Rockall lies in the North Atlantic approximately 250 miles west of Scotland. Its location between the Hebrides and North America symbolises the meeting of musical cultures that lies at the core of the project. The article describes the genesis of *The Band From Rockall* and examines its creative outcomes: a CD, vinyl album and behind-the-scenes DVD. It focuses on ways in which various identity markers (involving language, lyrics, music, visual elements and technology) are embedded within the project texts.

### Keywords

identity markers, Hebrides, Gaelic, Celtic music, rock and roll, Rockall

### Introduction

*The Band From Rockall* is a musical and audio-visual project by Rory and Calum Macdonald (co-founders of Scottish 'Celtic-rock' band Runrig in 1973). *The Band From Rockall* was officially released in April 2012 and involved the production of a 12-track CD, 8-track vinyl album, and a 'behind-the-scenes' DVD. The official project website describes the background to the creative endeavour as "the experience of growing up in the Western Isles in the late 1950s and 1960s, at a point in time when rock 'n' roll and the emerging pop culture impacted on the Gaelic community." The tiny, uninhabited, rocky outcrop of Rockall, lying in the North Atlantic ocean approximately 250 miles west of the Outer Hebrides (an archipelago that forms part of north-western Scotland) is used within *The Band From Rockall* as "a piece of symbolism for the project – a place of transient identity – lying half way between the Hebrides and America<sup>1</sup> – half way between rock 'n' roll and the ceilidh house".<sup>2</sup>

Mutch describes identity formation as a "complex and contested process" (2007: 118), while Warschauer suggests that identity is dynamic, and based on "the choices that

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individuals make in different circumstances over time” (2001: online). *The Band From Rockall* takes the form of a creative reflection on an especially dynamic period in terms of the artists’ identity formation: a time in which their island-based Gaelic community was exposed to new, internationalising musical and cultural influences associated with North American rock and roll. The project resonates with Baldacchino’s observation that islands tend to be marked by “confluence and juxtaposition of the understanding of local and global realities, or interior and exterior references of meaning, of having roots at home while also deploying routes away” (2005: 248). It also offers a useful case study of a music-based project with a fluid sense of identity and place – one in which “musical phenomena are not grounded within categorical location” (Musicindevelopment, 2011: online).

This article aims to illustrate that original creative work, impacting largely at the emotional rather than intellectual level; can convey a sense of the dynamics of identity formation in a compelling and subtly-nuanced manner. It explores aspects of identity formation and expression by focusing on ways in which numerous identity markers are embedded within the project texts: the CD, vinyl album and DVD. The article begins with a brief overview of the genesis of the project and then documents a range of identity markers relating to language, lyrics, music, visual elements and technology. It concludes with a discussion that contextualises the findings of the textual analysis.

Although the project title makes specific reference to the islet of Rockall, this article is not concerned with the history and/or characteristics of Rockall itself. The project uses Rockall as a straightforward symbol of cultural engagement, and does not attempt to draw out any complex symbolic associations with the actual islet. For example, the ‘harsh’ aspects of the islet, such as its desolate isolation, barrenness, and disputed ownership (see Royle, 2014), do not find any resonance in the tone of the project. The focus of this article is on the meeting of Hebrides’ Gaelic culture and North American rock culture that lies at the core of *The Band From Rockall* project.

### Background

Rory Macdonald (Scottish Gaelic: MacDhomhnaill) was born in Dornoch (Dòrnach) Sutherland, a county in the northern tip of Scotland, on July 27, 1949. The Macdonald family moved to the town of Lochmaddy on North Uist in 1953, and Calum was born on November 12 of that year. North Uist is an island of 117 square miles and is part of the Outer Hebrides, an archipelago of more than 200 (mostly uninhabited) islands separated from the Scottish mainland and the Inner Hebrides islands by the Minch to the north and Sea of the Hebrides to the south. The Outer Hebrides has been described by Lane as “the most strongly coherent Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig) speaking area in the world” (2011: 116).

The Macdonald family moved to Portree (Port Rìgh), the largest town on the Isle of Skye in the Inner Hebrides, to enable Rory to attend secondary school. In Skye, the Macdonald brothers formed the Celtic Rock band Runrig (originally Run-Rig) in 1973, originally as a part-time, three-piece ensemble, with Rory (guitar), Calum (drums) and Blair Douglas (accordion). Donnie Munro (vocals) joined in 1974. Over the next decade, the band expanded its line-up and became increasingly successful. Runrig secured a major international recording contract with Chrysalis Records in 1987, signalling “the start of a whole new approach to the life and work of the band” (Runrig, 2013: online), and over the next ten years the group toured extensively and released numerous

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albums. In 1997 Munro left to pursue a political career, and was replaced by vocalist Bruce Guthro, from Cape Breton Island, Canada (an island with a high proportion of descendents of Scottish migrants and a local Gaelic language culture). Runrig released a compilation album and DVD package (2010) and in 2011 the band “decided to take a break from touring, the sabbatical giving opportunity for all the members to pursue various solo projects” *ibid*). Runrig celebrated 40 years in the music business in 2013.



Figure 1 – Locations of Rockall, North and South Uist and the Scottish mainland

For Rory and Calum, Runrig’s sabbatical provided space for *The Band From Rockall*, and the two musicians spent a considerable time on the selection of songs for the project, often delving into their extensive catalogue of unused song ‘demos’ – some from as far back as the 1960s – with the ultimate aim of “reflecting the music and songs that we heard when growing up in Uist, late 50s early 60s” (Rory Macdonald, *The Band from Rockall* DVD, subtitled translation from Gaelic). Rory’s DVD commentary provides additional insight into the genesis and ethos of the project:

*We were probably witnessing the final days of the old culture before television and electricity arrived. People always visiting each other, ceilidhing. We would hear the stories, the songs and the laughter – it was a precious time for us. But on the other hand we heard rock’n’roll for the first time... a blast went off! We’d never heard anything like this before. So it was with these experiences, together with our feelings reflecting back that we tried to integrate into the new music and the new songs for the album.*

### Identity Markers in The Band From Rockall

As indicated by the preceding quotations, the Macdonald brothers wanted the project to capture a sense of some of the “feelings” and sounds associated with a particularly dynamic period in terms of their identity formation; a period in which potent outside cultural elements were impacting on their Gaelic islander community and on their personal musical development. This section of the article examines how the project incorporates a wide range of identity markers relating to language, lyrics, music, visual elements, and technology.

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### *Language and lyric markers*

Perhaps the most readily apparent, dual-identity marker within the project is that of language. All components of the project (CD, LP, DVD) include both Gaelic and English, and the Macdonald brothers' bilingual fluency is apparent, both in songs and DVD commentaries. The CD includes eight songs in English and four in Gaelic; while the vinyl LP has one side of four English songs and another side of four Gaelic songs (see Table 1). Commentaries on the DVD are mostly in Gaelic, with the overall impression being one of relaxed, effortless bilingualism: an impression that is enhanced by seamless shifts from Gaelic to English. As far as the songwriting process is concerned, Calum's comments indicate that choice of language tends to be unconscious.

*We never try to analyse it - I suppose that during the writing process, there just happens to a time when you are in Gaelic mode and another time when you are in English. But most of the time you are not really aware of a difference - it's just like another musical colour or a different musical instrument all contributing to a whole entity. (Unattributed, 2012: online)*

CD	VINYL LP
'The Band From Rockall' 'Luaidh' 'There's A Chain' 'One Way Ticket' 'The Days' 'Mairi Bhàn' 'Eval' 'When I Walk Among The Hills' 'Am Bàrd Deireannach' 'Nighean Òg Nan Sùilean Ciùin' 'For The Love Of Alison' 'Into The Aurora'	Side 1 'The Band From Rockall' 'Eval' 'One Way Ticket' 'When I Walk Among The Hills / Reprise'  Side 2 'Luaidh' 'Mairi Bhàn' 'Am Bàrd Deireannach' 'Nighean Òg Nan Sùilean Ciùin'

Table 1: CD and Vinyl LP Track lists

The song 'Luaidh' provides a useful illustration of how the 'colour' of lyrics can be used as an effective song hook<sup>3</sup>. In this song, the pleasing sonority and singability of the Gaelic word for love (*luaidh*) with its soft "l" and changing vowel sound makes it a suitable choice for the repeated lyric/melodic hook (and title) of the song. As Sparling notes, in Gaelic "rhyme occurs between accented vowels, rather than between syllables, as in English" (2007: 34); and so the word that begins the verse (*nuair* - when) also makes an effective rhyme with the chorus *luaidh*. The sound of other Gaelic words is also savoured as the song progresses (see Table 2), with subsequent words articulated separately and slowly, allowing the listener to appreciate the sonority of the language. As Calum explains in the DVD commentary:

*When we were writing this, we wanted every word, every part of the melody and arrangement to be as direct, as simple and 'pop' in its approach. For example, the second verse here... The first line - When. The second line - Saw. The third line - I. The fourth line - You.*

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Luaidh, luaidh Luaidh, O luaidh	Love, love Love, O love
'Nuair a chunnaic mi thu 'Nuair a dhùisg mi bho'm bhruadar 'S a' mhadainn ùr 's a' dearrs' a' ghrian O cha robh mi fada smuaintinn Gum b'e seo gaol mo mhiann	When I saw you When I awoke from my dreaming In the new morning and the rays of the sun I did not take long in thinking That this was my desire

Table 2: 'Luaidh': lyric example and translation (C. Macdonald / R. Macdonald)

In terms of lyrical themes, the album is notable for exploring elements associated with a sense of collective identity. 'Am Bàrd Deireannach' ('The Last Bard'), laments the passing of a famous Gaelic poet/bard, while other Gaelic songs focus on connections with loved ones. 'Mairi Bhàn' ('Fair-haired Mary') deals with the impact of World War II on Rory and Calum's parents, while 'Nighean òg Nan Sùilean Ciùin' ('Young Girl with the Gentle Eyes') speaks of intense young love that has grown deeper over time. Almost all of the English songs (including 'Eval', 'One Way Ticket', 'There's a Chain', 'For the Love of Alison', 'Into the Aurora' and 'The Days') also deals with such connections. In fact, the centrality and constancy of this connection with loved ones (family members in particular) represents an over-arching theme across the project, with membership of family and community seen as a core aspect of identity, providing a sense of continuity during changing times. Calum's reflections on the choice of songs emphasise the importance of this family theme:

*But when we did choose them, you could see there was a very strong personal attachment to certain songs - the family scene, which is always part of our work anyway - not just in a personal sense, but in a wider sense of where you've come from, influences. A lot of the songs have that sense of family. (in Cummings, 2013: online)*

The song 'There's a Chain' provides an example of the Macdonald brothers' typically reverent attitude to family identity, as evident in the lyrics of the chorus: "There's a chain it binds us all in life's a-wonder/ there's a chain hold it closely as you go/ let this name be your family and your shelter."

The gently reverential tone extends beyond the family theme. It is also evident in a sense of awe and wonder that characterises the many descriptions of nature. Examples include: "As evening clouds drift over Eval/ And fading colours leave the land/ And human homes lie stilled in sleep" ('Eval'); and "In this passing choir of seasons, turning around the sun" ('When I Walk Among the Hills'). Calum describes the landscape as "a huge influence... Not just in terms of physical beauty and colour and mood, but it is the scale of the landscape that constantly determines the size and sense of mortality of man within it" (Unattributed, 2013: online). He also identifies "a sense of the spiritual" as representing "a common denominator in our content" (ibid). Although this sense of spirituality is mostly manifested in a subtle, understated manner, it sometimes appears in a more overt form, as in the following lyrics from the song 'When I Walk Among the Hills': "When I walk among the hills I feel near you/ there's a path that reaches up higher than the trees."

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### *Musical markers*

As Rory outlines in the DVD, musical identity markers play a prominent role in “reflecting the music and songs that we heard when growing up in Uist, late ‘50s early ‘60s”. He also demonstrates some of the guitar sounds he chose for the album, and explains the reasons for his choices: “Duane Eddy and Hank Marvin have long been guitar heroes of mine so for the album we wanted to use a little of that musical colour on the tracks”. Similarly, Calum describes the inspiration for (what he describes as) the “roomy” sound of the drums in terms of “trying to create the kind of sound that you maybe hear on early ‘50s records – that kind of open sound” (ibid).

Many of the important musical identity markers, including obvious markers and more subtle ones, can be found on the eponymous title track used as the opening song on all project formats: CD, LP and DVD. On the DVD, ‘The Band from Rockall’ track begins with extremely faint ocean sounds, alluding to the coastal landscape that also features as a prominent visual element. A brief swelling sound on electronic keyboard precedes the appearance of the first instrumental hook: a minimal, non-syncopated, low-range, electric-guitar melody using a bright, reverberant, guitar sound readily associated with early 1960s rock.<sup>4</sup> This theme is set over a heavy rock groove in which a reverberant, straight eighth-note drum pattern is combined with a busier, sixteenth-note rhythm guitar pattern. Strummed chords with signature 1960s’ style ‘tremolo’ and ‘whammy bar’ effects<sup>5</sup> are added at the ends of melodic phrases; while a repetitive keyboard ostinato provides a more contemporary-sounding textural element.

When the main chorus melody is first introduced (in instrumental form) the blended identity of this musical hybrid becomes more readily apparent. The 1960s’ rock groove is joined by a folk/Celtic-influenced melody<sup>6</sup> doubled on a number of instruments (electric guitar, saxophone and accordion) with different genre associations. Distinctive characteristic’ of the melody include: a lack of syncopation; use of major pentatonic scale; alternation between tonic (I) and subdominant (IV) chords; and alternate phrases ending on the relative minor and major. Rory’s high-set and forceful lead vocals enter to deliver an evocative lyrical description of a coastal landscape (“the sands were hot and burning/ the days stretched out as far as eyes could see/ and from somewhere far away I heard you singing”); and when the chorus appears in vocal form it features multiple voices (male and female) singing in harmony. The chorus lyrics (“don’t fade away and leave me here without a trace”) can be read to once again reinforce the idea that human connections are central to the formation and maintenance of identity.

Other songs on the CD and LP illustrate a similar approach to musical structure: one in which the varied musical identity markers are smoothly integrated rather than dramatically contrasted. ‘Mairi Bhàn’ provides an example of this technique applied to a song with Gaelic lyrics. In this instance, the music begins by highlighting folk/Celtic identity markers, while 1960s’ rock elements (such as rock rhythm section) emerge as the song develops, creating an opposite marker sequence to the one used in the ‘The Band from Rockall’. After an introduction that highlights sweet-sounding, clean guitar arpeggios over a descending bass line, Rory’s voice enters with a strong, folk/Celtic-influenced melody. This major-key melody is set to a simple diatonic chord pattern and sweeps into the high vocal range, highlighting the appealing timbre of the voice in this register, before descending again. As the verse melody ends, a number of 1960s’ rock elements (including four-beat drum pattern, electric bass, and slightly distorted guitar riffs) are seamlessly introduced. Rock elements assume a more prominent place at the end of the second verse, as an eighth-note guitar pattern leads to a heavy rock groove

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with typical kick-snare alternation. However, rather than abandoning folk markers in favour of rock sounds, the song now introduces a new folk/Celtic-influenced melody on electric guitar. These elements are recombined in various ways as the song continues, before the outro reprises the sweet-sounding arpeggios of the introduction.

### Visual markers

Various components of the project (website, CD, LP, DVD) incorporate a range of visual identity markers designed to highlight the meeting of cultures and eras and to enhance the sense of reverence for family, history and landscape. The signature image, used prominently on all components, depicts Rory and Calum standing on a small country road in an uninhabited landscape, with an open-door touring van just off in the distance. Rory holds his vintage 1960s' Gretsch guitar, while Calum's snare drum lies on the ground in front of him. Rory studied graphic design at Glasgow School of Art before Runrig became a professional band, and the design aspects of the image (mountains and sky set at a striking oblique angle; strong contrasting blocks of colour) demonstrate a keen artistic sensibility. In keeping with Calum's comments that it is "the scale of the landscape that constantly determines the size and sense of mortality of man within it" (Unattributed, 2002: online), the brothers and their vehicle are dwarfed by a panorama of grasslands, mountains and sky. This sense of the vastness and relative emptiness of the Hebridean landscape (especially the coastal landscape) is also emphasised throughout the DVD, with the inclusion of numerous images of islands, deserted beaches, boats, and open expanses of water.

The central importance of ongoing connections with family, friends and community is reinforced by visual elements. For example, the DVD includes numerous old photos and grainy home videos and a handwritten poem by MacDonald's father is featured prominently at one point (18.30). A verse from this poem, written in 1944, is displayed on screen, providing compelling evidence of love for the island homeland, as indicated by the following excerpt: "from the lone shieling in the misty islands, mountains divide and a waste of sea, but still the heart is strong the blood is Highland, and I in dreams behold the Hebrides." Island history is highlighted during an extended section of the DVD (beginning at 37.09) in which an elderly islander (Fionnlagh Moireasdan) talks about whaling days, accompanied by original black and white footage of whalers.

The visual elements are also designed to draw regular attention to the meeting of old and new and the project website describes how, "a certain visual style was created to represent the confrontation of the old traditions of the Western Isles influenced by the 'modern technology' of music and 'new' musical sound that came from the other side of the Atlantic". For example, old equipment (such as vintage guitars and tape recorders) is regularly displayed and discussed, as well as being compared with new equipment (such as digital recording desks and iPods). It is interesting in this regard to note that, on the cover of the DVD (a contemporary audio-visual format) the most prominent image is of Calum and Rory sitting at a large, modern mixing desk, with a reel-to-reel tape positioned in the background. High-resolution videos (of elements such as band performances and landscapes) are regularly contrasted with grainy, hand-held family videos, as well as historical (black and white) footage. Crossfades are used to emphasis some of these contrasts: for example, this occurs when a section from a performance by 1960s' band the Shadows is blended into a video of a performance of the 'The Band From Rockall' track (from 4.33). Occasionally, visual edits are used to make literal musical-visual connections: an example is found in 'Luaidh', when shifts from major to

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minor keys at phrase ends are supported by corresponding shifts from colour to black and white.

### Technological Markers

Technological identity markers also take a prominent place with *The Band From Rockall*. As might be expected of a project with a focus on 1950s' and 1960s' rock, many of these markers are retro in nature. The project website notes that: "The musical references throughout have been retro, recorded on analogue tape with Rory playing classic guitars and keyboards of the era" ('The Music'). Rory regularly uses a vintage Gretsch electric guitar to obtain 1960s' style guitar sounds, and on the DVD he gives a brief demonstration on the instrument, employing tremolo and whammy bar effects in the process (17.18). The instrument is also featured in the image used on the website home page and on the vinyl LP cover. As previously noted, Calum aimed to re-create a "roomy" sound on drums; and at one point (55.03) he comments on his choice of a naturally reverberant space outside a Glasgow studio.

*The guys have got this fantastic space just outside the studio door... terrific room for reverb... So we're just gonna try a snare drum and it's... an attempt to ... emulate... two of the great snare drums in rock music... 'The Boxer' - Simon and Garfunkel, and Springsteen's 'Born in the USA'.*

The choice of amplifiers and analog recording technology also represents an important identity marker, with the website stating that the recording used "equipment that will resonate to those aficionados [sic] of the analogue recording days Watkins Copycat, Selmer Truvoice, Binson Echorec, Fender Vibroverb, Watkins Westminster".

The vinyl album is another retro marker, described on the website as being "in keeping with the musical and recording ethos of the project" ('The Music'). A posting on project's Facebook page made soon after the album's official release reveals an obvious enthusiasm for vinyl and a belief in its superior sound quality:

*For those of you out there who wished to re-visit the unbeatable sonic delights of vinyl, we hope you enjoy...Please note: track listing on LP is different to the CD due to the time limitations of vinyl. A case of sound quality over quantity.*

However, many other components of the project (including CD, DVD, digital downloads, internet site, Facebook page) indicate a willingness to embrace the benefits of contemporary technology.

Similarly, the project uses both home-studio and professional studio recording with the initial recording "achieved in the home-demo studio environment, then taken to mother studios in Denmark and Glasgow to assimilate the parts" (ibid). Rory's comments on the DVD reveal that he and Calum have different preferences in terms of recording technology.

*This is the machine that I used for the album. Tascam 16 tracks, 1 inch analogue tape and in my opinion the sound is much better than you get on digital formats. For example, when I'm recording guitars, it's like the sound is absorbed into the tape bringing a warmth and character to the music. Also, working with it is more tactile and you can see before you*



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*just how the machine is working. They're out of fashion now, of course, but for me at least, this set-up works great. Calum's gone over to 'the other side' – he only works with a computer now. But me...I prefer to be working with this than with a typewriter and a mouse!*

On the DVD, Calum further illustrates his personal embrace of modern technologies when he is filmed leaving for a songwriting excursion. As the visuals focus on his small motorboat, Calum comments on his contemporary version of fishing "I'm going fishing for lyrics today and here are the tools – an iPod, a Dictophone and the files".

The set-up of the DVD itself represents another 'half-way' aspect in terms of the use of technology, in that the digital audio-visual digital medium is formatted in a retro manner: with no menus, chapters, or extra features. This makes navigation rather cumbersome and frustrating, and it appears to have drawn the ire of some fans. A message on the band's Facebook page on January 15th 2013 attempted to explain the logic of the formatting:

*ADDRESSING A COUPLE OF QUERIES REGARDING THE ABSENCE OF CHAPTERS AND MENU ON THE DVD.*

*In keeping with the ethos of the whole Band From Rockall project, it was decided to resist getting into menus, chapters and all the other extra features and gimmicks of the modern DVD format. From a creative and technological point of view, that approach was bypassed in favour of simply presenting the film as a piece of work, running from start to finish, as one would in a retro context. Trust that thought sits ok with most of you!*

### Thematic Explorations

The creative outcomes of *The Band from Rockall*, together with the many documented comments by the Macdonald brothers, make it clear that this project represents a celebration of cross-cultural interaction and dual/multiple identity formation. Rory and Calum recall the 1960s with fondness, regarding it as an exciting time during which the impact of American rock and roll provided an enriching, rather than disruptive, element. Accordingly, the songs recorded for *The Band From Rockall* project are characterised by a seamless and unselfconscious integration of English and Gaelic language, as well as rock and folk/Celtic musical elements.

As already noted, Rory and Calum's English and Gaelic fluency contributes to the album's tone of relaxed and confident bilingualism and can be seen to reflect the general strength of Gaelic in the Hebrides, where they grew up. As Lane has identified in an overview of Gaelic-speaking during the 20th century in Outer Hebrides (the setting for the brothers' early childhoods):

*In the 1901 and 1921 censuses, all parishes were reported to be over 75% Gaelic speaking. By 1971, most areas were still more than 75% Gaelic speaking, and the language remains relatively strong in spite of a continued decline. In the 2001 census 61.1% of the population of the Outer Hebrides spoke Gaelic (compared with 1.2% in the whole of Scotland). (2011: 117)*

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The survival of Gaelic-speaking communities within the Hebrides has not come without a significant struggle. Communities within the Hebrides (and other parts of Scotland) have faced major threats to their survival - most notably in the form of the so-called 'Highland Clearances' of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During these clearances, many poor subsistence families, including many from the island of Skye, were forcibly evicted from their homes and land, and there was a resultant wave of Scottish emigration to large Scottish cities and overseas countries, including Canada, USA, New Zealand and Australia. In 1981, the Macdonald brothers made a creative response to these events through the Runrig album *Recovery*, which addresses the devastation of Gaelic culture and clan society associated with the clearances.

Three decades later, Calum's view regarding the preservation of Gaelic language is essentially positive, although he acknowledges the need for a continuing struggle in this area. When asked to give an assessment of the state of the Gaelic community nearly three decades after the *Recovery* album, he responded:

*I think that we have certainly 'recovered'. We have not been 'saved from extinction' by any manner of means, and the future is always going to be a struggle, but the Gaelic community is now much more confident and high profile than it was 30 years ago. Initiatives such as Gaelic Medium Education, an expanding Broadcasting service and the rise of the Fèisean Movement have been particularly important for the success of the language and the culture as a whole.* (Unattributed, 2009: online)

The two Gaelic-language initiatives mentioned by Calum merit some further comment, since they both aim to address the decline in Gaelic speaking noted in the earlier citation from Lane (2011). Gaelic Medium Education (GME) is a school program using Gaelic as the primary language, with English taught as a second language. The Highland Council argues that, "Gaelic medium education represents the best hope for reversing the decline of Gaelic in the Highlands, especially if it is supported by opportunities for young people to use Gaelic in the home and community" (The Highland Council, nd: online). GME has become increasingly popular in recent times. For example, in 2012/13 the Highland Authority provided programs in 18 Gaelic nurseries (for three and four- year-olds), 21 primary schools, and 12 secondary schools, reaching a total of over 1400 students. A basic grounding in Gaelic is provided at 52 primary schools and 12 secondary schools (ibid). The name of the Fèisean movement derives from the Gaelic word *Fèis* (festival or feast). The movement is involved in organising activities such as festivals of Gaelic song, dance, drama, and traditional music, with opportunities provided for skill development in these areas. The first *Fèis* (*Fèis Bharraigh*) was held in 1981 on the Isle of Barra, resulting from the action of a group of citizens who were concerned that local traditions were dying out (Fèisean Nan Gaidheal, nd: online). After the success of this event, many other communities established their own events, with a commitment to the preservation and development of Gaelic language and culture.

The *Band From Rockall* project can itself be seen to play a role in sustaining and promoting Gaelic language through its gently assertive inclusion of Gaelic commentaries and songs within a contemporary Scottish project. With regard to a different location and culture, Johnson has attested to the specific power of song in helping to preserve language, outlining how Jèrriais, a "minority yet highly significant language" from Jersey has been "foregrounded through song as a way of maintaining and developing identity" (2008: 73) and, as Dembling has noted:

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*Music has a long association with language revitalization movements in Scotland and Nova Scotia. The strong oral tradition and broad international popularity of Celtic music has sparked interest among language learners as well as drawing many to the language through its musical traditions. (2007: 248).*

However, although minority languages can attract attention as “a useful marker of local distinctiveness in a globalising world” (Sallabank, 2011: 28); this type of distinctiveness can be somewhat ephemeral and superficial. In an article on Cape Breton Gaelic singer Mary Jane Lamond, for instance, Sparling argues that “for a mainstream audience, Gaelic is an ‘exotic’ language” and that “Lamond’s fluency in Gaelic is associated with authentic origins and a pure, ancient tradition” (2007: 37). Similarly, Gaelic language elements within *The Band From Rockall* are likely to have largely exotic appeal for some mainstream listeners<sup>8</sup>. And, in terms of flow-on benefits to language preservation, Lang and McLeod (2005) caution that, although “Gaelic organisations have identified Gaelic music, and Gaelic culture more generally, as a key resource for language development in Scotland,” the current approach to the Gaelic arts - focused “principally on serving the non-Gaelic-speaking ‘mass market’” - is not particularly helpful in terms of language preservation, since it often involves “symbolic rather than instrumental [functional]” use of language.

Turning to consideration of the musical language employed within *The Band From Rockall*, it is easy to find parallels between the project’s relaxed and confident bilingualism and its seamless and assured combination of rock and folk/Celtic musical elements. The songs illustrate that these elements have been thoroughly absorbed into the brothers’ musical identities; so much so that their natural musical language is unapologetically hybrid, with rock and folk/Celtic aspects representing the proverbial ‘two sides of one coin’. This is unsurprising, given Rory and Calum’s lengthy engagement with musical hybridity. Their initial connection with rock was thoroughly consolidated during the 1970s with the formation of Runrig. Runrig drew extensively on rock elements, as well as tapping into the “rich musical traditions of Ireland and Scotland that had provided much of the material for the [1970s] folk rock revival” (Mutch, 2007: 121), and the band has continued to combine rock and folk/Celtic elements throughout its four-decade career. Despite what has been described as “a long history of contested definitions of authentic Gaelic expression” (Dembling, 2010: 245), the Macdonald brothers appear to be entirely comfortable with contemporary Scottish musical diversity and hybridity. In October 2012 a message thanking Gaelic radio for its support of *The Band From Rockall* album appeared on the band’s Facebook page making it clear that the brothers see no tension between “folk” and “Celtic crossover”; and that they applaud the station’s “lack of pretension”:

*Our grateful thanks for ALL the airplay that the album has received on Gaelic Radio since its release – Moran Taing, gu dearbh!  
In our humble opinion, Caithream Ciuil (Mon–Fri, 14.00–16.00) hosted by island babes, Mairead MacLennan and Seonag Monk knocks spots of ANY of the other afternoon shows in the country. Highly recommended for a great mix of current folk and Celtic crossover music... and refreshingly presented with warmth, humour and lack of pretension.*

There is little doubt that the hybrid quality of *The Band From Rockall* also enhances its appeal to non-Gaelic audiences, just as Runrig’s mainstream appeal was built on

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musical hybrids. Numerous authors confirm that musical crossovers - combining aspects of traditional musics with Western pop/rock elements - can appeal to international, mainstream audiences. For example, Sparling suggests that Mary Jane Lamond “attempted to combine traditional elements, such as imagery and lyrics, with pop accompaniments and arrangements in order to appeal simultaneously to both traditional and mainstream audiences” (2007: 35). In a study of the anthemic (2005) Fijian song “We are Fiji”, Cattermole noted the benefits of using “a Western pop style accompanied by Western musical instruments” in making a song accessible “for global as well as domestic consumption” (2008: 112). Similarly, in a discussion of Polynesian instrumentation and percussion contests, Devatine has described such events as manifesting “a knowledgeable mixture of genres while maintaining a respectable balance with tradition” (2009: 12) – a characterisation that is also applicable to *The Band From Rockall* project.

Devatine’s (2009) observations on orality are also relevant to *The Band From Rockall* project, which represents a contemporary manifestation of the age-old process of telling meaningful stories through the (primarily) oral medium of song. Devatine argues that:

*Orality is usually represented as ‘frozen’, when in fact it is not ‘frozen’ at all. Certainly, it establishes itself on tradition, but it seeks and absorbs newness. It promotes creativity and adapts to modernity.* (2009: 11)

Responding to Devatine, Mateata-Allain describes her concept of orality as “a marvellous foundation for hybridity, or métissage” and characterises Devatine as identifying that “a blending of the traditional and the modern results in more innovative ways to perceive and create the world” (2009: 8). *The Band From Rockall* demonstrates an embrace of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ that resonates with Devatine’s ideas. This is a praiseworthy achievement, given the potential for a backward-looking project of this type to become overly imbued with nostalgia – described by Campopiano as “a pleasure or sadness caused by a wistful longing for something or someone from the past” (2014: 75). Campopiano pays particular attention to “tech-nostalgia,” based around “nostalgia for such things as photographs and degraded film, low-fidelity sound, and obsolete hardware” (ibid) and *The Band From Rockall* project is notable for the inclusion of numerous tech-nostalgia elements.

However, although the project does incorporate many nostalgic elements – including lyrical themes; sounds and musical techniques from the 1960s; family and historical photos and videos; and retro technology – there is no pervading sense that the past was better than the present, or that things should stay as they were. Retro and contemporary aspects sit comfortably alongside each other; and overtly nostalgic elements are consistently employed in ways that connect the past and present, rather than merely celebrate the past for its own sake. Wilson argues that: “while nostalgia may in fact debilitate or disenable identity and be dysfunctional for individuals, research in various disciplines quite consistently demonstrates the positive or beneficial uses of nostalgia” (2005: 10). She concludes that, used constructively “nostalgia, in its ability to facilitate continuity of identity, can help to provide a sanctuary of meaning” (ibid).

Wilson’s notion of “a sanctuary of meaning” can be seen to resonate with Burholt, Scharf and Walsh’s research into small Irish communities, which indicates that foundations of contemporary islander identities include “an historical and cultural sense of belonging, frequent social interaction within cohesive, safe and secure communities,

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and a persistence of 'traditional' values" (2013: 11). It seems clear that, for Rory and Calum, a strong sense of connection with the Gaelic community and their own extended family represents a critical foundation for identity, allowing other elements to be absorbed and processed without disrupting the overall sense of a place in the world. As Calum's comments on the song 'The Days' in the DVD make clear, family identity represents a primary cross-generational thread.

*It's a song about family and all the great issues of the day are not as important as this – that's the whole feeling of it. But family in the sense of really you've come from, the people you've come with, their values, taking that into your own immediate family and planting that in another generation and moving forward.*

In "moving forward" while simultaneously connecting past and present, *The Band From Rockall* serves as a good example of what Hayward has described as "re-creation" - a process that involves "an historical reclamation and reassertion in which the proponents are involved in re-creating a cultural presence in a modern syncretic context" (2001: xiv). Although the Celtic-rock genre might today be considered by some younger musicians to be somewhat old-fashioned, it retains a place within the range of contemporary Scottish musical expression. And, after 40 years in the music industry, Rory and Calum continue to demonstrate an admirable desire to find new ways of expressing aspects of their multi-faceted contemporary identities.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Rockall is actually much closer to the Hebrides than to North America.

<sup>2</sup> A cèilidh is a Gaelic social gathering involving Gaelic music and dancing, and the Cèilidh House is a well-known live music venue in Oban, a coastal town in the Firth of Lorn in north-west Scotland.

<sup>3</sup> A song hook is a catchy lyrical or musical element designed to attract the listener's attention (to hook them, in the sense of a fish being hooked).

<sup>4</sup> Groups such as the Shadows (UK) and Beach Boys (USA) made this type of sound very popular.

<sup>5</sup> A tremolo effect is a 'fluttering' sound produced by rapid volume fluctuations. The whammy bar is a lever attached to the electric guitar and is used to alter the string tension and thereby raise or lower the pitch.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'Celtic music' has been regularly critiqued for being too broad. For example, Mutch (2007) argues: "The term 'Celtic' risks an essentialist approach which both masks the very different traditions within Scotland and does not help in explaining the emergence of distinctively British forms of music. The problems rest with a broad-brush use of the term 'Celtic' on both sides of the border, albeit with different agendas at work. South of the border, the usage is a careless one, in which the term is used to refer to Scotland, Ireland and Wales, sometimes in a fashion which implies close connections between the three" (116). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore this debate in detail, or to undertake a detailed analysis of the specific origins of melodies. Therefore, I have chosen to refer to the generic concept of "folk/Celtic-influenced" musical elements, and to describe pertinent musical characteristics.

<sup>7</sup> A basic form of hut.

<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that the Macdonald brothers' band Runrig has received extensive 'mainstream' support from non-Gaelic speakers; it is therefore likely that *The Band From Rockall* also attracted mainstream listeners.

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