

# Brian McNeill

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Hi everyone - welcome to my latest newsletter. My apologies that it's slightly late, but I won't follow the current trend and blame that on either Covid or Brexit. It's just late.

Let me start with some very satisfying news. My old friend [Scooter Muse](#), five-string banjo champion, ace guitarist, and my companion in crime on many a festival stage, has just done me the honour of recording the first guitar piece I ever wrote, *The Tall Ships In Their Prime*.

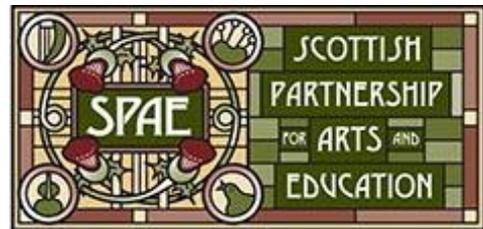
I first saw the two ships of the title, the *Hesper* and the *Luther Little*, when the Battlefield Band was in the state of Maine during one of our early nineteen-eighties tours of the USA. After a night of reasonably wild post-gig carousing, I rounded a corner to find myself on the sea front of the town of Wiscasset, and the sight that met me was one of the most beautiful and desolate things I've ever seen; two derelict and crumbling schooners, abandoned because they were, in the coming age of steam, deemed no longer economical to run. But, wrecked or not, somehow they still had grandeur.





I didn't have a camera with me, but I quickly realised I wouldn't have needed one anyway - the sight of them refused to leave me until I'd responded in some sort of creative way. And so the guitar piece was born. I have to say there were many false starts, because I was, at the time, still finding my way on the instrument. In the end it took about three months to finish the tune, and I finally recorded it in 1985 on *Unstrung Hero*. It has rarely left my live repertoire since. Scooter's guitar version (he's in banjo mode in the picture) is a fine one, full of precise technique that never gets in the way of emotion. I look forward to the rest of the album, which I'm sure will be just as good. I'll let you know when it becomes available.

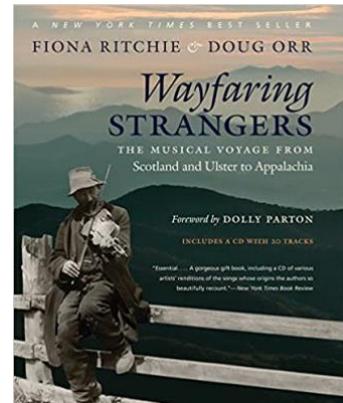
On the live gig front, like most of my peers, I remain becalmed. However, my frustration has been eased by the musical work which is still coming in. SPAE, the [Scottish Partnership for Arts and Education](#), the St. Louis organisation which has done so much to foster Scottish music in Mis-



ouri, commissioned me to make a teaching video for the schools I can't visit in person this year because of Covid. This is the first year for as long as I can remember that I haven't been in St Louis, teaching and performing in schools and at the great [Focal Point](#), a favourite stage and a unique venue. I hope it won't be long before I can return. I urge you to support it. The fiddle picture on the left was taken there.

For the teaching material, I took two really well-known traditional tunes, *The Athole Highlanders* and *The Black Bear*, and one of my own, *The Drovers' Road*. I've demonstrated them, told the histories and myths behind them and added a few tips as to how they might be decorated and played. It was great fun to do, and my thanks go to Diane McCullough, Michael Herron and SPAE's board for inviting me to do it.

One other recent event has given me immense satisfaction. I've often taught over the years, both as a fiddler and a songwriter, at one of America's most respected traditional music courses, the [Swannanoa Gathering](#), at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. That led a few years ago to me becoming, in a very small way, part of an award-winning book called [Wayfaring Strangers](#). It's a wonderful exploration of that most fertile exchange of living musical traditions, the one between Appalachia's Scots-Irish immigrants and its indigenous peoples, a cross-fertilisation which began centuries ago and continues today, fuelled by sheer musical brio and undeterred by difficulty or distance.



I've just received the news that this groundbreaking book



has just sold its first 20,000 copies *in hardback*. That, in today's publishing climate, is a rare feat, and as they launch their paperback edition, I want to congratulate authors [Fiona Ritchie](#) and [Doug Orr](#), and I'd also like to recommend this book to every one of you. If you want to know how music and people can shape each other and stamp the authority of a culture on a landscape, this is required reading.

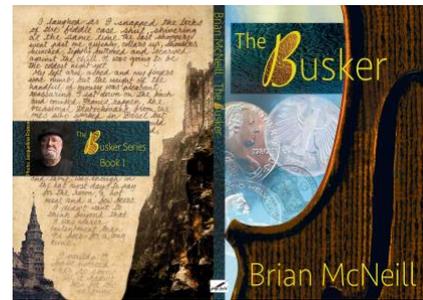
Songwriting in general is something which often lands in my postbag. Enquiries range from *These are some of my songs, are they any good?* through *What's the best way to write songs?* to the despairing *Why have all the good songs been written already?* The only question I won't reply to is *How do I make money from writing songs?*

That's not any kind of snobbery, by the way - many commercial songwriters have left



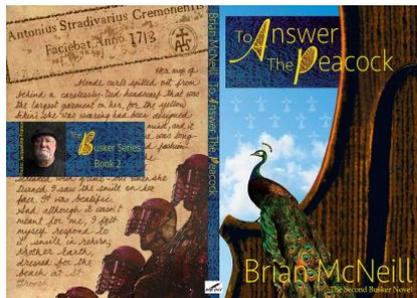
lasting legacies which have deeply affected the lives of many people. It's just a concept which is personally alien to me. I can't write a song unless the idea of it touches me, unless something about the story or situation involved makes it important, and usually that involves people - that unpredictable spice which seasons history with so many surprises.

When I teach songwriting - a hard subject to do justice to - the first thing I tell my students is that there are as many different kinds of song as there are songwriters, and that the spark which begins the process of writing, when it comes, is something which, if you're serious about it, *you will learn to recognise*. It can be a phrase, or a picture, or a mood, or a word. In my own case, *No Gods And Precious Few Heroes* came from a poem by the late, great Hamish Henderson; *Any Mick'll Do* began with hearing *Johnny Mickledoo*, the comic Irish song, on the radio, at the same time as seeing a newspaper headline about The Troubles - and



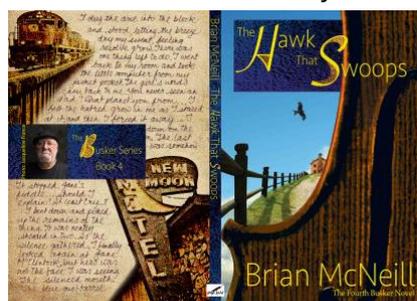
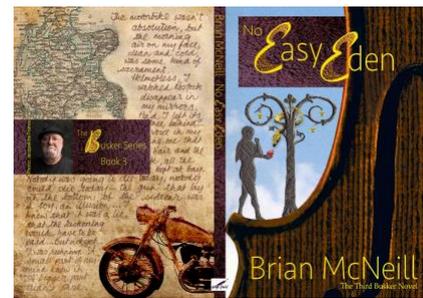
*The Back O' The North*

*Wind* came from an evening in a German pub, where I was told the legend prevalent in so many northern European countries, that Scotland (or Norway, or Lapland, or Russia) was the land behind the wind. Given that one of the recurring themes in my songwriting has been the Scottish diaspora, you'll know how important



that last one has been to me. It wasn't just the beginning of a song, it was the beginning of a whole family of songs.

And of course, remember that the spark is just the beginning - however far an impetus or a great idea takes you, it's unlikely to give you a finished piece of work. Unless you're a very rare animal indeed, there's going to be hard graft involved, probably a lot of it, and anyone who has songwriting aspirations should never forget that. I look forward to your comments!



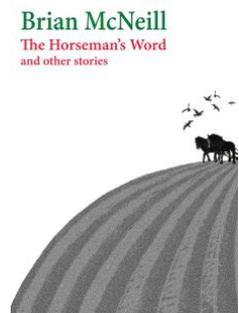
On the prose writing side, I'm as busy as ever on my various projects. The most important of these recently has been organisational - so many people on this newsletter list or at gigs have lamented the passing of hardback or paperback that I felt compelled to address it, so I'm in the middle of completing paperback versions of all my eBooks, and I'm happy to tell you

that all four books in the Busker series - *The Busker*, *To Answer The Peacock*, *No Easy Eden* and *The Hawk That Swoops* - will be available in this format on Amazon very shortly. Furthermore, by the end of November, they'll be available direct from my website in the same way as my CDs. I make no apology for including both front and back covers here - I wanted to show you just how much fun Jacqueline and I had designing them - the icing on the cake! And I would, without being cheeky, point out one slight difference between ordering from me or buying from Amazon - if having

your books signed or dedicated is important to you, then that is something Amazon simply cannot do ...

But I'm afraid this newsletter does not only carry good news. Scotland has lost one of its greatest champions of its own literature, [Professor Douglas Gifford](#).

I first met Dougie Gifford in the late sixties, when he was a young lecturer and I was an 18-year-old student at Strathclyde University. He taught a first year course in Scottish literature, which wasn't a class I had chosen, but when various of my friends told me how good it was, I asked him if I could sit in. He kindly said yes, and to say I was glad I did so is one of the great understatements of my life - it was mesmerising. It changed many things for me, and the way he taught - at ease but with gentle authority, never dismissive, always accessible - somehow let me take seriously the slowly growing seed which I had felt obliged to keep well hidden (Falkirk boys didn't write *books* - it was hard enough to imagine them playing *music*), that I might some day have the temerity to try my hand at writing myself ...



Dougie Gifford was generous, insightful, passionate about his subject and encyclopaedic in his knowledge of it. I dedicated my own collection of shorter Scottish fiction, [The Horseman's Word and other stories](#), to him, but I never got the chance to send him a copy before he died. I'll always regret that. My thoughts are with his family.



Now to an 'and finally' memory. The picture shown here was taken when the Battlefield Band was trying to agree on a front cover for our 1980 album *Home Is Where The Van Is*. Eventually Robin Morton, our manager, made a decision. We loaded up our Mercedes van with a good deal of the furniture from his house and set it up in a field, somewhere near (I think) the town of Biggar. What we didn't realise until we unloaded the van was that the cat had decided to join us ...

My thanks to Jacqueline France for most of the photographs. And I repeat that this newsletter is never sent without permission. If you decide you no longer wish to receive it, just let me know. And if you know anyone you think might like to get it, please ask them to email me.

Wherever you are, take care of yourself and your own, and as always, I'd really enjoy hearing from you.

All the best,

Pyria