

## McDonaldisation (Talking twenty-fifth century Celtic fringe)

The interviews in the *Margins of Music* section are not the newest of conversations. They occurred in the last two years, and in spite of their relative antiquity were felt to be as relevant and interesting as anything turned around in twenty four hours. Hopefully the reader will be content with this state of affairs and find the pieces of interest. Interviews are by Oliver Lowenstein.

**The appearance of Mouth Music in 1990 with their eponymous album brought forth the critical plaudits. Since that time the two founders, Talitha Mackenzie and Martin Swan have gone their separate ways producing a series of individual and inventive musics. In this two part section the two branches are investigated. Here an interview with Talitha focuses on the origins of the mouth music form within the context of her commitment to the preservation of the indigenous Gaelic language and culture, and the New Age patronage of 'Celtic' culture. On page 16 the techno dimension of making a form of 'world' music is put to Martin.**



Talitha Mackenzie

Uncertainty reverberates around the current interest in music from the Celtic margins. Various examples seem to contain many of the opportunities, dilemmas, and ambiguities implicit in making a music which has to play off so many contested borders. A particularly multi-resonant example is one based, today separately, in Edinburgh, Scotland; Talitha Mackenzie, and Martin Swan who formed the group Mouth Music in 1988.

In Mouth Music once again there is the collision of the received purity of the past with the danger of the future. The traditional Highlands and Islands music, known as 'Puirt a bue' or in English, Mouth Music, has been radically remade with contemporary technology and a meld of ancient and up to the minute instrumentation. This in turn suggests the tensions surrounding the disappearance of a complete (Celtic) language, with the future possibilities of various technologies. It resonates with both the New Age and World or Roots Music communities and their appropriation of things Celtic, and how both compete with each other, as well as with the traditional Scottish and Nationalist communities for Celtic symbols of identity. Indeed where and whether these various communities do and don't meet, make accommodations, seems to find a distant though clear echo in the work of Mouth Music and particularly Talitha Mackenzie, though with the emphasis phrased slightly differently for each project.

Those projects have been particularly musically fruitful, although the two only released one album together, also called Mouth Music, in the summer of 1990, which was the Transatlantic folk hit of the year. The two parted company soon after, but they have each gone on to interesting projects. Swan, using the Mouth Music name, reinvented the music for a crossover world music/rock music audience. Mackenzie, a music conservatory trained singer, has also developed her particular vision of a present day Gaelic music, set in the

roots of the culture, but equally using the contemporary possibilities of technology. A naturally expressive singer, she has made a personal and inner journey into Scottish Gaelic music, and is familiar with the folk world, the local traditional Gaelic culture of Scotland which is trying to preserve this music, and the scholarly ethnomusicological community which focuses equally on both the music and its context. She is also a linguist, having set about learning Gaelic, and is committed to the continuation and renewing of Gaelic as a language for the future. Her remit for this though is contemporary, believing in the enhancing capacities technology could bring to the transmission of the culture she feels she belongs to. I write 'feels', because she was in fact born in New York, and quite possibly would never have found herself singing in Gaelic but for an earlier generation of the technologies of communication, cinema and records. Lastly, although she describes herself as an agnostic, I would think it fair to say that she wants her music to convey the positive vibration and power, which she feels is part of Celtic Gaelic music and some would say contains aspects of the voice of a New Age in it.

Mackenzie, unusually, is placed to talk about all these elements – New Age; tradition, ethnomusicology, folk and world musics; language and linguistic diversity for Gaelic and for all the languages on the verge of extinction; the technology-craft-tradition dimension; and connected to that the confusion she has brought with her of living on the boundary between insider and outsider.

Mouth Music, the evocative name of the group who brought her to the attentions of sections of folk and world music audiences, is primarily the name of a sophisticated and physical form of singing of the Highlands and Islands. There is irony in Mackenzie's New York place of birth and the means by which she first experienced Gaelic song: this was in a film

