

Band's trip back to a Highland home comes to emotional Finnish

Tour manager revisits the scene of happy childhood holidays

EXCLUSIVE BY GREG RUSSELL

TWO expatriate Scots who have been living in Finland for decades are heading back to Scotland later this month on a musical sojourn that will bring back childhood memories for at least one of them.

Paisley-born artist Don McCracken is managing a tour of small Highland and Island venues for a two-piece Finnish band called Nightbird – Fenno-Swedish singer-songwriter Anna-Stina Jungerstam, from Vaasa in Finnish Ostrobothnia, and fellow Scot Mike Lennie, a guitar, bass and keyboard player, who was born in Perth, raised in Fife, and came of age in Dundee.

Their 10-date tour starts on March 25 and includes a private house gig in Dundee, and bars in Applecross, Kirkwall, Inverness and Stornoway, as well as the Tigh an Truish hotel, on the Isle of Seil, which holds a special place in McCracken's heart after he spent all his childhood holidays there.

"My granny Sarah (Sal) McDougall was born at 19 Balvicar, in a slate quarrier's cottage in 1901," he says.

"She was the youngest of 13 children, 11 of whom survived. She went to school in Ellenabeich at a time when Gaelic was a forbidden language, so she grew up bilingual, only using Gaelic words when the English equivalent didn't quite hit the mark.

"She moved down to Govanhill in Glasgow as a teenager, and married my grandad Gilbert Watson, but they kept a connection with the house, and by the time I came along in 1971, she owned it as the last surviving child.

"Sal and Gilbert spent most of the year there, coming back down to Paisley where we lived in the winter, and I spent the whole length of all my childhood school summer holidays there since before I can remember.

"The house has since been demolished, but the space remains."

The tour is a combination of work and pleasure, which came about after Jungerstam became enthralled by McCracken and Lennie's tales of Scotland.

She is a Swedish-speaking Finn, part of a 5% minority of the country



who speak Swedish as their mother-tongue rather than Finnish, and she is keen to travel in the Highlands to explore the parallels between her own situation and that of Gaelic speakers here.

"One of the first places I played in Helsinki was Musta Kissa bar in Kallio, back in 2015" says Jungerstam.

"It's run by a Scottish guy and a lot of Scots hang out there. Everyone was just so welcoming – I played the gig and just loved the place, and everybody seemed to love me too.

"The customers there would all tell me stories about Scotland and it seemed like such a wonderful part of the world. I began to read about the country, and became especially enchanted with the Highlands.

"It felt like such a mythical place, but very real too. Both Ostrobothnia and the Highlands have seen great waves of emigration, there's that terrible sadness of people leaving, and both have local languages and ways of life that are in the minority within the dominant culture."

She says the fusion of Highland and Afro-American musical customs in the US went on to create the gospel music that in turn influenced the blues pioneers she so adores – and she has created her own sub-genre. "I've been compared to Johnny Cash,

Nightbird – Anna-Stina Jungerstam and Scot Mike Lennie look forward to their tour

I taught myself to play the guitar by strumming along to White Stripes albums. The musical style that I have created, the Ostrobothnian Blues, is part of that tradition too. Not only that, but The White Stripes' Jack White and Johnny Cash have Scottish ancestors too, so I just knew I had to go there."

FIVE years on and Jungerstam has become friendly with staff and regulars at Musta Kissa and, last autumn, with a new album in the pipeline, decided she had to come to Scotland.

"I roped in my friend Donny [McCracken] as a tour manager and another friend Mike Lennie to share the stage – we sat down round the kitchen table and this time it all worked out: in no time at all we had a 10-date tour of Highland towns and villages ready to roll.

"Nobody plays in such small places – everybody said we were crazy to even try, but sometimes the good kind of crazy is all you need to make a dream come true."

Lennie lived in Helsinki for eight years and has toured internationally – including his hometown Dundee – and his first solo album, *Wonderland*, was recorded in Finland in 2017.

He has been back to Scotland since

then as part of a band and, once again resident in Dundee, he's keen to explore parts of his native country that, until now, have simply been question marks on a map.

McCracken said one of his clearest memories was going to sleep at night, and his mother singing him one of her favourite songs, *Morningtown Ride* by The Seekers.

Now, he says, he has one thing he must do on Seil: "My mother died in summer 2018, and I feel that the time for grieving is over and it's time to get back to living life.

"My mother requested that her ashes be mixed with my dad's when he dies, and scattered at the top of the Barra Mor, looking over the sea to Easdale Island and Mull.

"The Tigh an Truish on Seil is the very last date on the tour, the end of the line. When we get there we'll head towards Ellenabeich, and down by the sea, at the foot of the Barra Mor, we'll carry out a ritual of our own.

"I'll hold a slate from the shore while Mike and Anna-Stina sing *Morningtown Ride*. That slate will retain the vibration, and I'll carry it back to Finland. When the time comes to scatter the ashes, I'll place the slate on the mountain, and that will be the song that's playing through the ether as they blow away on the wind."

I spent the whole length of all my childhood school summer holidays there since before I can remember