
Davy Hutchison, accordionist 1900 –1975

A memoir by his son Jack Hutchison with a discography and notes



Davy Hutchison, 1930s
Photograph from Mrs Lilian Higgins, Brechin.
Jack Hutchison advises that accordion shown was borrowed for the purpose from an Aberdeen music shop and was more sophisticated than the instrument Davy actually used.

My father, the youngest of five children of a Scottish tinker family, was born in a roadside tent somewhere in the area of Banff in Scotland. Although neither of his parents could read nor write, both were concertina players and during the summer months they earned a living by busking in the streets and at fairs and of course...Highland gatherings. During the winter months they earned their living by making willow baskets, which they sold door to door.

My father, like his brothers and sisters, taught himself to read, and write, which he could do, but with limitations. And when he signed his name, he always did so with great deliberation... and pride.

Life was slower in those days, especially for tinkers, who were in reality the descendants of Scotland's Highland Clearances. As travellers, they had a lot of time on their hands, and their favourite pastime was music: piping, singing or playing the fiddle. And they were good. They knew every note of every traditional Scottish and Irish pipe tune, and when they played round the fire at night it was always solo because this music is actually designed for solo playing.

Scottish tinkers have derived their own form of tonic sol-fa for the bagpipes. It is verbal and known as *mouth music* or *diddling*. Tinkers call it *cantering*. It is simply eight different mouth sounds that identify each of the eight notes on a set of bagpipes. And as there is only one scale on a set of Scottish bagpipes, it makes pipe tunes easy to learn.

A Scottish Musical Miscellany

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And that was how my father learned his music, round the campfire. He was a piper first but when the accordion was introduced in the early nineteen hundreds he took to the box with great gusto. The early button accordions were called *melodeons*. They only had one row of ten keys in the scale of C major although some were made in the scale of G major, which, for Scottish and Irish music is a lot better although they still had limitations. That explains why the music of Peter Wyper, James Brown and William Hannah on early discs was usually on the key of C. To change to the key of G, which they sometimes did, they had to use a G tuned melodeon.

My father could not read a note of music, yet, the astonishing thing was, he knew and understood the mechanics of the chromatic scales. For example, if you dropped a drawing pin onto a plate from a height of five foot, he would tell you the note it produced on impact. He would say, that's G natural or A sharp or C. And then I would compare the note made by the impact of the drawing pin on the plate by playing the same note on the accordion. He was always right of course. Whether he learned that skill through his practice of learning his music by ear, or whether he was simply gifted, I will never know.

Bagpipes were brought back from the Middle East during the crusades, and the violin was brought back from China during the fourteenth century by the Italian explorer, Marco Polo. That means both instruments were in Scotland hundreds of years before the introduction of written music by the Church in the seventeenth century, which means that, originally, every body played by ear, so perhaps my father's gift was not so unusual.

My father was a street musician. That's how he earned his living. And if it rained he would play inside pubs. The landlords would welcome him. There were no jukeboxes, you see. He would play inside the pub, he knew every tune and he would play requests, especially tunes like The High Level, The Marquis of Huntly, The Spey in a Spate, Eugene Stratton, Devil in the Kitchen, Athol Brose, and so on. He'd be paid perhaps a shilling or two for a request and he'd go round with the bonnet several times a night.

I remember accompanying him to Banchory in the year 1950 where he played in a pub called the *Laird o' Drumblair*. That night he took home twelve pounds. And when you consider the average take home pay for a tradesman during the 1950s was only about eight pounds a week, that twelve pounds for one night represented a considerable sum.

James Scott Skinner and my father knew each other. Although still in his teens, my father played a lot of Scott Skinner's tunes. And Scott Skinner would travel into Aberdeen on a Saturday for the sole purpose of listening to my father playing in the Castlegate. And Scott Skinner would make notes as my father played. A lot of Scott Skinner's pipe/fiddle adaptation tunes, contain instructions to exaggerate the G natural. But my father went further down that same road, he did not simply exaggerate the G natural, instead he played the complete bar in the key of G. What a difference!

So, did James Scott Skinner copy my father or did my father copy Scott Skinner?

I remember when I first tried to learn to play pipe tunes on the button box. I could read music but the written music wasn't a bit like how my father played the same tune... and my father explained:

"The bagpipe scale," he said, "is not the same as the chromatic scale on a piano or an accordion or any other musical instrument. Although the bagpipe scale is pitched on A, it is made up of four notes of the scale of A, and four notes of G, yes, but not quite." He continued with, "Look at it like this, in the same way that you cannot transpose a tune written on a minor scale onto a major scale, or vice versa, the same law applies to the bagpipe scale. They don't work out quite right on the chromatic scales. What you have to do is to reconstruct that pipe tune in your mind, and only then, will it come out on the chromatic scales. And even then, as there are only eight notes on a set of bagpipes, and if you only used eight notes, that would make all pipe tunes sound the same, and boring, so they have to be worked on."

That is hardly the explanation of you'd expect from an illiterate man. And then he added:

"In any case when they rewrite pipe music for the fiddle, piano, or accordion, they simply add an F sharp to pipe sheet music."

And a similar thing applied to his strathspeys reels and hornpipes. He played each tune with great fervour, just like a fiddler. He was the only man who could ever emulate the fiddle on an accordion. One of his tunes was an Irish reel called, Lord Macdonald's Reel. It follows Maggie Cameron on one of his records in your [raretones.org] archives. Notice that he plays Lord Macdonald's Reel with body...fervour...and feeling... at the end of three other tunes. He must have been tired.

I remember one day when pointing out to my father a strathspey on a record by a well-known Scottish accordionist. "It has a nice lilt," I said. His reply was a mute nod. "Sounds pretty good," I added trying to draw him. "That tune," he said. "Has been played slowly, and then...speeded up."

I was in my teens at the time and I was aghast at his suggestion, because I saw that as a form of cheating. It is not, of course. We all have the right to present a record of anything we like, anyway we like. Years later I studied other records by well-known Scottish accordionists, and I now see that my father was quite right, and the practice was widespread.

When you listen to a pipe tune by a band or an accordionist, and then listen to that same tune by my father, it's a different world. Your [raretones.org] record of one of his pipe/fiddle tunes, Maggie Cameron is a prime example. Nobody could ever play a pipe tune like Davy Hutchison.

As a showman, my father was quite unorthodox. Unlike Scotland's well known, or famous accordionists, he did not march onto the stage in a blaze of lights with a huge accordion strapped to his chest glittering under the spotlights with his name embossed across his accordion with diamonds. He had no need to. His showmanship was his music. That's all. Just his music. When he struck up in the street, even in competition with the noise from the traffic, with tunes like The Chicken Reel, [The Marquis of] Huntly's Farewell, Lord Macdonald's Reel, or The High Level, (which he incidentally played like a dream) people stopped, and stared, and searched their pockets for coins. The looks of disbelief on their faces is embedded in my mind forever...

During the nineteen twenties and early thirties, there were a lot of accordion competitions held in the small coastal towns in the North-East of Scotland. My father made a good living out of winning those competitions. Although I was not born at the time, the stories have been passed down to me by people who witnessed the events. Here I will tell you stories about two of them.

One competition was in Aberdeen. (There are probably many people still alive in Aberdeen who can remember the event) My father got first prize. Second prize was given to the well-known piano accordionist, a distant cousin of my fathers, Curly Mackay. But Curly went into a fit of pique and complained to the judges (a body of five pipers and fiddle players) that he should have the first prize.

"Why should you have first prize?" the judges asked. "Just take a look at my box," Curly replied with a sweeping gesture at his accordion. "Its brand new. Cost nearly a hunner quid...?" He then turned and threw a look of contempt of my fathers accordion, which was an old twenty-one button keyed International with four spoon type bases, and added, "There's no comparison...surely?" "This is a competition for the best accordion player," the judges spokesman replied sternly. "It has nothing to do with how much you paid for your box. Its the standard of the music produced by the performer. Curly, you have just played Davy nick nack and The Circassian Circle. Two nice wee tunes, yes, but they are barely B type tunes, whereas Davy Hutchison has just played three top A tunes, The Inverness Gathering, The Laird o Drumblair, and then he finished off with The High Level." Turning to my father he added, "Which you played like a dream Davy. And before you collect your prize and go, Davy, would you like to give us the The High Level again?"

Another competition my father told me about was held in Falkirk. It was big. Every big accordion name in Scotland had entered, some of whom went onto enjoy world fame. I don't know the actual date but my father arrived at Falkirk in his horse and cart, a week before the competition and entered his name as a competitor. He did not stay in a hotel. Instead he camped about half a mile outside Falkirk and worked Falkirk for a whole week before the competition. That is to say he busked in the streets and pubs, after all, crowds were arriving for the competition.

My father won easily, no one was in his class. And when my father was declared the winner, Peter Wyper leaped onto the stage and grabbed my fathers hand and shook it warmly as he congratulated him, but one of the other contestants, a man called [William] Hannah, stormed off the stage muttering about ignorant tinkers, who can't read or write music, lowering the tone of the competition by busking....

In today's socially advanced world, that is prejudice, but in those days, open hostility towards travelling people, tinkers and gypsies was quite normal.



Davy Hutchison
Photograph from Ann Johnson

In the year 1930 Beltona records bought the rights to the music of James Scott Skinner. They contacted my father and invited him to their studios in London. He went. They told him the tunes they wanted. He played every tune they asked for. And in one morning he made twelve double-sided records. Twenty-four recordings. Each record had between three and four tunes. That's makes a total of approximately 75 tunes. There was no rehearsal. No practice. And it was all done in one morning when he simply went into the studio, prepared himself by strapping his accordion to his chest and began playing when the green light went on... and stopped when the red light came on... he usually finished with a reel or a hornpipe...and you can actually hear him hurrying to finish before the red light came on...and it should be observed that his accordion was a two voiced 21-keyed International, less than twelve inches high with only four spoon type bases.

There are approximately seventy-five tunes on his twenty-four 1930 recordings. And for any man to remember all the names of the seventy five tunes and make twenty four records (one record had six Irish jigs all played at a speed of 12/8) without any practice or rehearsal and not hesitate or make a single mistake... gives an insight into my fathers enormous capacity for music.

In the year 1936, Beltona Records sent for my father again and he made another twelve double-sided records. Another seventy-five to eighty tunes. At the end of the recording session they paid him eight hundred pounds. Yes, eight hundred pounds, plus a further ten pounds if he would sign an agreement not to play for any other recording company. He signed and took the extra ten pounds. He wasn't a businessman. He should have got himself agent but he did not.

Upon his return Aberdeen, waiting for him outside our house was a body of agents and representatives from other recording companies like Regal, Parlophone and others from America.

My father contacted Beltona by phone. Beltona said he was under contract to them. And if he did make records for any other company would be in serious trouble. He was furious. He was not an educated man. He did not understand that all he had to do was give Beltona their ten pounds back and it would have been up to Beltona to sue him for their losses. Although Beltona records did ask him to make more records, he refused. And as you know, the studios were bombed during the war and all the original stamps were destroyed...during the war, my father became an alcoholic. Some people said it was the result being only a few feet away from a bomb explosion in Aberdeen during 1942 at a place called the Fountain near Great Northern Road. And of course his work took him inside pubs...the alcohol was always there. His alcoholism was bad. My mother left him in 1965. My brothers and sisters tried in vain for years to help by giving him a home. He was described as beyond help and ended up being barred from every pub and living in the local doss house in Aberdeen until he died in the year 1975... with half a bottle whisky in his pocket.

Jack Hutchison, April 2010

Discography

From Bill Dean-Myatt *Beltona Gramophone Records and their role in Scottish Popular Culture 1923-1975* MPhil Dissertation, Volume 3, Glasgow Caledonian University, 2002.

All tracks **marked †** are included in the raretunes.org archive and can be listened to online. Copies of several other recordings have been located and will be added to the archive in due course.

David Hutchison (The Accordeon Strathspey King)

Recorded Peckham, April 1931

Hutchison is noted as playing ‘piano accordion’. This is not correct and conflicts with the memoir above.

The Portree Man, Inveness Gathering M 13418-2 Bel 1666, BL 1666

Abercairn Highlanders,
Balmoral Highlanders, Road to the Isles M 13419-2 Bel 1666, BL 1666

Niel Gow’s Farewell to Whisky,
The Piper o’ Dundee, The Black Bear M 13420-2 Bel 1667, BL 1667

The Brown-Haired Maiden,
Where Gaudie Rins M 13421-2 Bel 1667, BL 1667

A Man’s a Man for a’ that, Bonnie Ann
Maggie Cameron and Reel † M 13422 Bel 1668, BL 1886

Bonnie Lass o’ Bon Accord, Lord Lyndoch
De’il among the Tailors † M 13423 Bel 1668, BL 1668

Auchten Hoose, Laird o’ Drumblair,
Speed the Plough † M 13424-2 Bel 1669, BL 1669

Atholl Highlanders, Highland Weddin’,
Brig of Perth † M 13425-2 Bel 1669, BL 1669

The Drunken Piper,
Miss Forbes’ Farewell to Banff,
De’il in the Kitchen † M 13426- Bel 1670, BL 1670

92nd's Farewell to Aberdeen,
A Hundred Pipers † M 13427 Bel 1670, BL 1670

Marquis of Huntly, Braes o' Mar,
High Level Horpnpipe M 13428-2 Bel 1671, BL 1671

Bonnie Strathyre, Pibroch o' Donald Dhu,
Leaving Glen Urquart M 13429-2 Bel 1671, BL 1671

David Hutchison (The Accordeon Strathspey King)

Recorded Edinburgh, c. 1936

Marquis o' Huntly's Fling,
Miller o' Drone, Dann Watt,
Liverpool Hornpipe M 497 Bel 2270, BL 2270

Carigmillar House, Miss Lyall,
Loch Leven Castle M 498 Bel 2270, BL 2270

Bervie Bridge, Wee Neavie,
Mason's Apron, Chicken Reel M 499 Bel 2280, BL 2280

Daft Donald, The Pap of Glencoe,
Three Quarters Cameron M 500 Bel 2258, BL 2258

I'll Gang nae mair tae yon toon,
Bonny Country Gairdens,
The Hills of Glenorchy M 501 Bel 2258, BL 2258

Allegory, The Gay Gordons,
The Lovat Scouts M 502 Bel 2259, BL 2259

MacPherson's Rant, The Four Posted
Bed, The Queen's Welcome to
Invercauld M 503 Bel 2259, BL 2259

The Glendhu Highlanders,
Dovecot Park,
The Gordons hae the guidin' oot M 504 Bel 2260, BL 2260

Peter's Tune, Tullybardine,
Bagpipe Polka, Elspeth Campbell M 505 Bel 2260, BL 2260

March, Strathspey and Reel - Ruin o' Me, Bobbie's Favourite, etc.	M 506	Bel 2260, BL 2260
Forbes Morrison, Willie Mackay, The Auld Wheel	M 507	Bel 2280, BL 2280
Hornpipes- Jake's the Lad, Derry, Flat Lancashire etc.	M 508	Bel 2299, BL 2299

In addition to his gramophone recordings there are recordings of Hutchison made in 1954 and 1955 by Hamish Henderson in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. It is understood that this material will be made public through the www.tobairandualchais.co.uk site in due course.

Note by Sandy Allan, nephew of Davy Hutchison.

I enjoyed my uncle's reminiscing. It filled in parts that I had been looking for.

My grandfather looked after me when my mother went to work. I must have been about 4 to 5 years old and I can honestly say that I had fun. He was a mine of information and of story telling which I can remember vividly to this day! He claimed to have befriended Percy Toplis, the Monocle'd Mutineer (before Alan Bleasdale even knew of him), and was on the run with him.

He was a great friend of Hamish Henderson, and they both enjoyed a dram together!! We went berry picking to Blairgowrie in 1969, when I was seven. I remember sitting in the parlour of a local hotel one evening, drinking lemonade, whilst my grandfather played, and someone outside of the room before entering saying: 'There is only one person who plays the accordion like that, and that's Davy Hutchison!' By the end of the evening the place was jumping. The other travelling people treated him as if he were royalty. The MacPhees and Stewarts all claimed him as their 'cousin Davy' and welcomed him to sit at their camp fire.

I think that Uncle Jackie paints a very bleak portrait of my grandfather, for Jackie moved to England in the 1950s, and really never saw his father's decline in the latter years.

To say he died whilst living in a doss house is incorrect. He was living with my Uncle Aky, after being released from hospital after two years with T.B., brought about no doubt by, in part, his lifestyle. Prior to this he had been diagnosed with senile dementia, and had been committed to Kingseat Mental Hospital near Newmachar. I remember the day he passed away (of a heart attack), and yes there was alcohol involved. It was a half bottle of Four Crown wine (which he was taking a swig out of at the time), he never was much of a whisky drinker, preferring either a bottle of 4 Billy's or VP wine, the true choice of alcoholics as spirits are way far too expensive... He at least died doing what he enjoyed.

Sandy Allan

In an email communication with Stuart Eydmann, 2 October 2010