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# John Watt, folk singer and songwriter

*Obituary, Scotsman 5 November 2011*

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Born: 23 March, 1933, in Dunfermline. Died: 31 October, 2011, in Perth, aged 78

JOHN Watt was the unruly spirit of Fife, a one-off singer, songwriter, organiser and raconteur who chronicled his beloved “kingdom” in such witty songs as *The Keltie Clippie* and *Fife’s Got Everything*, and whose roistering good humour belied a profound commitment to traditional music.

His death in Perth Royal Infirmary came just a day after the Dunfermline Folk Club he founded in 1961 as the Dunfermline Howff – one of Scotland’s first folk-song clubs – celebrated its 50th anniversary.

While he hardly recorded himself, Watt was a significant figure in the Scottish folk revival of the Sixties and Seventies, and a major influence on other Fife singers, some of whom went to attain much higher profiles, notably Barbara Dickson and Rab Noakes.

While best known for comic songs – *Fife’s Got Everything* being the kind of irreverent anthem unlikely to endear itself to tourist boards – Watt was also well capable of composing more tender or thoughtful material, such as the couthily poignant *Pittenweem Jo*.

His *Ode to Joe Corrie* celebrated the pitman playwright, and his *Eyemouth Disaster* lamented victims of the catastrophic storm of 1881.

Possibly his most overtly political song, *Out for Nowt*, was inspired by interviews he conducted with Scots veterans of the Spanish Civil War in conjunction with the Workers’ Educational Association.

A long-standing supporter of Dunfermline Athletic Football Club, his song about the team’s legendary goal-scorer, Charlie Dickson, used to be broadcast regularly at East End Park.

For such a bard of the people, John Leslie Watt came from a surprisingly middle-class background. The son of a Dunfermline family who owned a printing business, he was sent to Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh and did his national service with the Cameron Highlanders, serving in Austria and Egypt.

He might well have inherited the printing company, but his interests patently lay elsewhere, and while continuing to work for it as a travelling representative, the man with the suit and the company car would be out most evenings in pursuit of folk song.

Inspired by the Howff folk rendezvous in Edinburgh’s High Street, he and Jack Beck established the Dunfermline Howff in 1961, in a cellar that was also used by the hockey team he played for, and setting what would become the established folk club format, with guest performers, floor singers and so on.

Watt’s earliest group was a trio called *Tregullion*, but the 1970s saw him touring Scotland with the rumbustious *Great Fife Roadshow*, with fellow singers Davey Stewart, Rab Noakes, Archie Fisher and Barbara Dickson, among others.

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## A Scottish Musical Miscellany

Archive 2.1 Winter 2011

In 1976, he and Stewart recorded their well-received album *Shores of the Forth*, with the Beggar's Mantle Ceilidh Band. Stewart recalls his friend as a sharp wit, well able to take on a rowdy audience.

It would be 2000 before Watt recorded another album under his own name, his one-time protégé Rab Noakes hauling him into the studio to make *Heroes*.

Barbara Dickson, today a platinum-selling singer and award-winning actress, regards Watt as one of the most fundamental figures on the Scottish folk scene then – “he was a mover and shaker, the man who got things done”.

Watt not only cajoled the teenage Dickson to sing Scots songs at the Dunfermline Howff, but later, in the Great Fife Road Show, presented her with her first acting part, delivering the one-liner “Come oan, get aff,” while dressed as a bus conductress during *The Kelty Clippie*.

Noakes recalls how Watt brought “a wit and an energy and a style to the show”.

Watt may have cultivated a jocose persona, but he had a lesser appreciated serious side, one friend describing him as “a very thoughtful and responsible guy, amid the mayhem of the Sixties folk revival”.

Noakes agrees. “He was the life and soul of the party – a life force when you were with him, but it wasn't all flimsy joviality,” he said.

“He was a thoughtful and intelligent man, generous and loyal.”

A former chairman of the Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland (he could boast TMSA membership card No 2) he established the Kinross festival in 1971 before it eventually moved to Auchtermuchty, where he could be seen gleefully sporting a “Muchty Megastar” T-shirt.

He was married twice, firstly to Ann MacDonald, with whom he had two children, then to Cathy, whom he met at St Andrews Folk Club in the late Sixties, with whom he had another two.

Watt, who lived in Kinross in his later years, had experienced ill health since suffering a stroke 15 years ago, and more recently was devastated when his son, Alistair, succumbed to cancer.

The last time he sang publicly was at last year's Fife Traditional Singing weekend at Collessie in May, when he joined his old friend Davy Stewart in a rendition of *The Kelty Clippie*.

At last weekend's 50th anniversary celebrations at Dunfermline Folk Club – which Watt had been expected to attend – an oil painting of him by Ian Moir was presented to Cathy, on the day before its subject passed away.

Watt was also due to be inaugurated into the Scots Traditional Music Hall of Fame at this year's Scots Trad Music Awards ceremony in Perth, to be held on 3 December.

Sadly, that honour will now be bestowed posthumously, but his songs won't be far away.

JIM GILCHRIST