

Gordon Craigie

This month, I'm in conversation with Iona Fyfe – singer, musician, writer, and political, trade union and Scots language activist...



Iona Fyfe

BEING ABLE to list professional singer and musician, political activist, trade union official, Scots language advocate and newspaper columnist on your CV is pretty impressive, particularly at the age of only 23. Add in a number of prestigious national and international awards and nominations – alongside a live performance back catalogue that already includes Scotland, England, Wales, Denmark, Spain, Poland, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Canada and Australia – and it's clear that Iona Fyfe is an incredibly talented, and determined, young woman.

Iona grew up in Huntly and was educated at The Gordon Schools which, as she laughingly acknowledges, sounds like a private school but most definitely isn't: "Now, 'The Gordon Schools' sounds like Gordonstoun – no, completely different! [giggles] You've got your private schools – Robert Gordon's and Gordonstoun – and then you've got The Gordon Schools. The reason it's called that is because it was founded by Jean Gordon, Duchess of Gordon, 250 years ago, but people conflate that with the private schools. I did debating and public speaking and when we would go against private schools, like Albyn or St Margaret's for Girls, they thought we were a private school too because we were taking part in the debating competition. When we hosted them they were like, 'oh, you don't have locks on your toilets' and I'd be like, 'yeah, I know we don't because we've got no funding!'" This wouldn't be the last politically-charged observation that Iona would make...

Fitting in our conversation around her touring and recording commitments, Iona explained how her portfolio career had developed: "My parents aren't musical, but my extended family are so I'd go to local folk festivals. All my cousins play different instruments and I wanted a party piece too. I learned some Doric poems by the likes of Ian Middleton, Sheena Blackhall and Les Wheeler, and I went



An independent mind...



The Gordon Schools – no private, but apparently it's got a swimming pool...
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to events organised by the TMSA (Traditional Music and Song Association) – I've been a director of the TMSA for around four years now. When I went to some of these folk festivals I met other tradition bearers who were all saying, 'if you're going to do the Doric poetry why don't you do the singing as well?' I was always in school choirs but I wasn't a very strong singer, I was always really weak and airy, very 'head-voiced', not strong or confident and other people had more dominant voices – even now in a group environment my voice is pretty quiet compared to others. But I always had the confidence to perform in front of people, and Doric poetry was just my way into doing that. So that rapport with the audience and channelling a story, a dialogue, a narrative – in Scots – was always there from a very young age. Then I got a scholarship at the North East of Scotland Music School in Aberdeen and I'd go there every fortnight for a classical singing lesson. This was only a total of nine hours of training, but I also did amateur dramatics and musical theatre which gave me the techniques that I needed to apply in a traditional and folk setting. So I kept doing traditional ballads, bothy ballads, Doric poetry and piano all throughout my different phases of being a young teen."

"I was always told, 'stick in at school', 'music's not like a

The council-hoose syndrome makes you work really hard because you have to get out, you have to leave, you have to change, you have to do better, you have to move away and make something of yourself

real job', 'that's really risky, you should make sure that you've got something else'. I think by the time I was in secondary school I had 'council-hoose syndrome'. I think this is something that happens when you're brought up in an environment where, through no fault of your own, there's two pathways. There's becoming part of that environment and maybe falling in with the wrong folk, or not nailing it at school and maybe staying, or there's that constant fear of never leaving. The council-hoose syndrome makes you work really hard because you have to get out, you have to leave, you have to change, you have to do better, you have to move away and make something of yourself. I think that council-hoose syndrome is when you see other people around you that never left, and how sometimes dissatisfied they are, and you just want to work really hard and get away.



The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland © David Martin (cc-by-sa/2.0)

"You don't realise you grew up poor until you're fending for yourself and then you realise that... we didn't change our gym shoes as much as we should have, or we never got the branded items in the shop we always got the saver – you don't realise that you are poor per se until you are much older. I think my mum tried to protect me from that a wee bit and I think that she maybe had guilt that I couldn't do things that other kids could do. I was brought up by my mum in a lone parent household – I would see my dad but he wasn't very responsible or whatever, he had issues of his own. My relationship with my mum was more like us cohabiting and she brought me up. I think she tried to protect me from the whole council-hoose syndrome thing and was always trying to make me feel like we had more than we did while still being frugal – Mum's great with money and Dad's not! But I think that when you come from a working-class environment you just want social mobility even at a really young age. I think they were both very concerned when I decided that I would go and do music. I had stuck in so well at school that I could go and do other things but,

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when I decided it was music, I think they worried. I got into the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) when I was 16, and I think that was when they were like, 'oh wow, she can actually get a place at one of the best schools, maybe she can do it'. I think every parent worries about how their kid is going to go with their trajectory in life, but I think mine especially because they worried that I wasn't giving myself the best opportunities [with music] whereas if I went and did law or politics or business or whatever then I would have some sort of security. But they are generally quite supportive about my career."

For a while though, that career looked more likely to follow a more traditional route as Iona's 'council-hoose syndrome' drove her to be outstanding in all her academic subjects. "I just wanted an A in everything, I wanted to excel, to be the best. I think if you asked my Modern Studies teacher what I was going to be I was going to be a politician, my Drama teacher thought I was going to be an actress, my History teacher thought I would do history at uni. Because I stuck in with everything – except PE! – they all had their hopes for me. I really liked Modern Studies and History. I was 16 at the time of the [first] independence referendum and the entire school was really engaged. Being in Aberdeenshire, half the school was Tory farmers and half the school was people who were going to be Liberals and who just didn't understand it yet! It was a really interesting time to be in a secondary school because all the kids were quite engaged. Actually, it's really interesting because when you think about 15/16-year-olds I'd never imagine them to be as politically engaged as they were back in 2014. Everywhere you looked, it was there – in the syllabus, in the curriculum, it was what our teachers were talking to us about, although some of them struggled with not showing bias! We had a Modern Studies trip to the Scottish Parliament and it was just so cool and I felt very at home. It was really weird, I felt the sense of, 'oh this is cool, I like this', and I felt this strange sense of homeliness like, 'I feel like I belong here' – but then I thought f*** it, I'll just be a folk musician! [giggles again!]"

We're having this Zoom chat while Iona is back in her old bedroom in Huntly because she's performing in Inverness the following day. At one point, she temporarily goes on mute while she responds to her mum's shouted request as to when she wants her tea! "It's fine", she says, "we communicate through the medium of shouting!" Leaving Huntly, and her council-hoose, behind for the bright lights of Glasgow and the RCS at the age of 16 was clearly a big deal for Iona but following her passions would quickly become a recurring theme, as we shall see. And, despite graduating four years later with a first-class honours degree in Traditional Music, she still had problems to overcome: "At RCS, I had Rod Paterson and Fiona Hunter teach me repertoire Scots song and then I went to a musical theatre coach to do technique. All of these things came together to allow me to have autonomy over my own voice, and to understand what goes wrong with my voice because I had tonsillitis around 16 times in 18 months! I got my tonsils out when I was 20 and it was the most traumatic thing I had ever experienced – when you're a singer and you've got someone poking about in there... It is a huge recovery and I had to go to speech and language therapy for a year-and-a-half after that because my voice just wasn't where it was at. When you're a kid and you get your tonsils taen oot it's no as traumatic, you just get some ice cream and aff ye go! But as an adult and as a professional singer it's a hugely traumatic thing. Vocally, I still do a lot of things to help with that. [coughs!]"

Whatever she's doing with her voice, it's working. Iona was crowned Scots Singer of the Year at the 2018 MG Alba Scots Trad Music Awards, was a finalist in the BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year



Getting ready to play at Eden Court, Inverness with Graham Rorie and Michael Biggins

KENMURE



MAX THOMSON & IONA FYFE

IONA FYFE THE CAULD



in both 2017 and 2021 and won the Molloy Award at the Birmingham Tradfest in 2017. International recognition has included reviews like 'one of the best Scotland has to offer' from Germany, and 'a Scottish folksinger, magical and charismatic' from France while her wider talents have been described as bringing 'a new interpretation to the country genre' by Maverick Magazine. Having started her career as a traditional singer of Scottish folk songs and bothy ballads, Iona has recently been exploring other genres: "I think from 2015–18 I worked really hard to be *the* north-east folk singer, that sung bothy ballads and traditional ballads and all that. Then more and more as I grew up I was like, well, I haven't been on a farm, I don't have any feelings to this – what do I know about working a pair of horses? My great grandfather worked on a farm called Broadlands, which is documented in bothy ballad history, but living now in an urban environment in Glasgow, I felt more and more disconnected to, not the stories of the north-east but the bothy ballads or whatever, and that's cool."

"I've written songs – 'Banks of the Tigris' on my first album is a song that I wrote when I was trying to get my head around the situation in Iraq and in Syria. I had never sung that in a live set until a few weeks ago because I was too scared of being too political. It's really weird because the pop songs that I write are in Scots and the pop songs that I translate are in Scots, but when I write songs of protest I seem to write them in English, which is a bit of a pain! Maybe I feel subconsciously that the point to get across is important and maybe doing it in Scots isn't going to get that point across? I'll change that, I have to change that. I co-wrote a song about the Kenmure Street thing and people love that at live gigs. It's like a super take-down of the UK government – there's a line in it that goes:

Think of that woman that makes the decisions,
Who wears a posh suit and smirks at the press,
She thinks taking back control means deporting
our people,
Instead of the issues she ought tae address.

You know, I can definitely do that in Scots it's just that it came out in English, whereas sometimes when I sit at the piano and write songs about feelings it seems to come out in Scots. I like writing, but I don't know if I've got much to write about or say. Something really has to impact me on a personal level for me to actually stick my neck out and write about it.

"I've released things like 'Scotland Yet', which was written by Davie Steele, but with more a 'mandolinn' vibe, a less

folkie/chookie/bothy-ballad vibe, and that track went really well. The SNP played it at their pre-election rally so thousands of people heard it and I was really happy. But I got kickback when I released that song – I released it a month before the election and I didn't realise that it would be broken by purdah – my publicist emailed me and said, 'we can try after the election but it's really unlikely that most places are going to play this right now, this isn't a good time to release it'. But I did it anyway! BBC Radio Ulster played it and cut off the last verse – I'd rather they just didn't play it ... if you're going to cut off the last verse which has got the most important messaging, just don't play my song, I'm not going to miss the £1 I'll get from the royalties from BBC Radio Ulster!"

Iona says she draws a lot of inspiration from her hero, Taylor Swift, not only musically but in the way she has total control over her career: "I don't have management or an agent – I don't have 'people'! It's just me – all of the designs you see online, all of the creative musical choices, I have the ultimate executive say on everything. It's really liberating, but it also means that if someone buys a CD online then it's me that sends it out – I'm not a control freak, I'm just a grippit Aberdonian! I don't want people to make money exploiting me, the only person I want to make money for is myself [laughs] and the musicians I work with. In my spare time I listen to people like Kacey Musgraves and Taylor Swift, and I have done since I was 13 so those musicians have really shaped what I want to sound like. Taylor Swift released an album called Folk Lore last year and it's so folkie, so indie, I love it. It really showed me that you don't have to

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stick to one genre, you can change it over and over again. She came from super-choochie country and then went into full-blown pop and now she's come right back round and she sounds really indie folkie and I thought, wow, amazing, you can change what you're doing but still have authenticity and integrity with the content and the language."

That mention of language is important because it fuses her passion for music with her absolute commitment to the Scots language – Iona was named Scots Speaker o the Year at the Scots Language Awards in 2021, adding to her successes in 2020 (Scots Performer o the Year) and 2019 (Young Scots Speaker o the Year). In September Iona released what she claims is the first-ever Scots pop single, 'The Cauld', and is working on releasing a Scots version of a Taylor Swift song, 'Love Story'. "Yeah, 'The Cauld' is literally just a pop song in Scots, and it's really simple. I think it's probably the first pop song in Scots, but when I say 'pop song' it's in the pop genre and when I say 'Scots' it's in the Scots language. We've already heard people like The Proclaimers who have sung in Scottish English, the accents, but they're not actually using the Scots language. The video for 'The Cauld' is very poppy, it's not sexualised but it's no a folk singer cutting about wi a lang dress, it's sparkles and short skirts, it's what folk music needs I think and it's what the Scots language needs. We recorded 'Love Story' back in March but you have to sit on them for a while because you don't punt everything oot at the same time! Around 500 primary schoolkids in Aberdeenshire have listened to it as part of a workshop thing I did with YMI Fèis Rois (Youth Music Initiative) to show the kids that



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speaking Scots or Doric can be cool. Instead of giving them foostie auld Burns stuff it's better to give them material that's more familiar to them. For kids to be able to read Harry Potter in Scots is amazing, great, and for kids to be able to hear a Taylor Swift song in Scots is also cool, brilliant, the more and more material that's made in their own language the more they're going to keep it and not change it when they move into secondary school or move for uni. I think that kids totally self-censor when they are in a vulnerable situation – I do it all the time, when I meet new folk I'm terrified of what they're going to think about me, and I self-censor the way that I speak."

"If I go down to London, for a Musicians' Union meeting or whatever, I feel like I struggle to get my point across or be taken seriously if I use Scots words, so I totally self-censor the way that I speak. But that's just part of code-switching and bilingualism, that you can change register linguistically speaking. So the Taylor Swift thing is going to be interesting. I have to get clearance, not from her label but from her personally – if you translate a song you have to get specific clearance from the writer of the song to make sure that your translation isn't taking the song out of context, so that means actually making sure that the writer of the song clears it. And it doesn't matter who the writer is – Lewis Capaldi, Taylor Swift, auld Jim doon the road – the writer has tae clear it! So that'll be interesting. I'm excited to see what happens, but if we can change Spotify's language policy we can definitely get Taylor Swift to look at a song!"

That last sentence, delivered with her trademark giggle, refers to her successful one-woman campaign to get Spotify to recognise the Scots language as a genre: "Last December, we did an in-house home recording of a Scots translation of 'In the Bleak Midwinter', which is such a pretty song, and punted it up on Spotify, Apple Music, all the usual suspects, all of the streaming sites. There's a backend to the Spotify platform that artists see and I noticed that, when you submit your song, it asks which language it's in – and I realised that Scots wasn't listed there. They had every single other minority language in there – the very specific type of French that people speak in Jersey and the Channel Islands, and Welsh, Manx, Gaelic, and everything else but they didn't have Scots! So I was like, this is ridiculous – all my back catalogue is in Scots and artists like Siobhan Miller and Karine Polwart, for example, have also had their stuff categorised as English, just because they didn't have Scots as an option. Spotify was so slow at getting back to me and their emails were generic so I evidently wasn't speaking to a human. I wrote an open letter and tried to constantly gie them hell on Twitter, but when I was on an online folk music conference in Kansas City I noticed that someone who worked at Spotify for the folk music genre was in a panel and you could speak to them on the system. So I emailed them and, within two days, she had fixed it!"





Iona relaxing between rehearsals on the Rosneath peninsula

And that Spotify success is just one example of Iona's commitment to the promotion of the Scots language. She's an Executive Committee member of Oor Vyce, the campaign for the legal recognition of the Scots language, with the aim of getting a Scots Language Act (SLA) onto the Holyrood statute books. This would give Scots the same advantages, in terms of Equality and Diversity monitoring, as Gaelic has benefited from since 2005, and would create opportunities for greater public funding and recognition of Scots language projects. "We constituted Oor Vyce to try and get a SLA put through parliament. In 2016, only four MSPs did their Holyrood oath and affirmation in Scots, but in 2020 eight of them did, plus one in Orcadian, a few in Doric and a few in Lallans. That's amazing progress, and 35 out of 129 MSPs signed the Scots Pledge:

If elected, I pledge to:

Recognise Scots and all its varieties (such as Doric, Shetland, Orcadian, etc.) as a legitimate living language and consider the needs of its speakers

Raise the language's profile in my constituency, the chamber, my parliamentary office and beyond

Support, in principle, the idea of legislative action to protect, empower and promote Scots

That's like 29% of the Government pledging to protect Scots. Now, 30% of Scotland speaks Scots, so that's very representative, really good, really healthy. The 2022 census will probably actually uncover that more folk identify as being able to have skills in speaking, reading and writing in Scots. Back in 2011, 1.9 million said that they could speak, read or write in Scots but now, because so many things have happened over the last 10 years, Scots is cool again because people like Ally Heather and Len Pennie – Miss PunnyPenny – have made Scots more cool. People are more aware of it, it's been in the press more, there's been more music made in Scots, more TV, so more people will probably tick that box and those statistics will help Oor Vyce going forward with the SLA pledge. It's just a shame the census hadn't happened this year, because of Covid, but next year it'll be cool and I think that census will be really handy, politically speaking, for getting an Act through."

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There is a school of thought that links the 1960's revival in Scottish folk music to the emergence of the SNP as a serious political force and to a growing public demand for national self-determination – leading directly to the 1979 and 1997 devolution referendums and the 2014 independence referendum – and that the folkie expression of language, tradition and social justice feeds directly into contemporary politics. The interconnection of Iona's passions for music, language and politics blurs the boundaries between what, at first glance, can seem like quite separate issues, but she seems happy to keep all her plates spinning. "I feel that through linguistic activism and my Musicians Union stuff – she's a regional committee member of the Scotland and Northern Ireland branch – I still have a connection to Scottish politics, and I feel like I can still maybe do something with that when I'm a little bit older. I realised that the more I got involved in the trade union, and got to speak at the STUC, the more I could re-establish a connection with politics, and the more I felt that I didn't make the wrong decision and more songs crept into our set list which had a political message. I felt more connected, and not disassociated with politics because, after the 2014 vote and then the 2016 Brexit vote and then the Trump vote, I was like, 'screw this, this is horrendous, nothing's going my way'. I felt... not disengaged but just disassociated a bit. So the more I could do things that were mostly standing up for worker's rights, musician's rights... that was cool. Being a folk musician, I guess it's like the Woody Guthrie quote, 'it's a folk singer's job to comfort disturbed people and to disturb comfortable people', yeah..."

"But I want to give myself a fair shot at being a musician first. I now think that I probably will return formally to politics in 2038, when I'm 40. By that time, I'll have a sense of what it's like to actually be on the ground and have life experience. I don't really like it when someone goes straight from a politics degree to running for parliament. I think that's strange because they haven't had experience in actually working or struggling or being vulnerable or not having enough money. I've always had plans, and I feel like 2038 is quite a safe bet because the political landscape will be different by then. For musicians, and particularly women musicians, if something really formidable and career solidifying hasn't happened by the time you're in your late 30s then it's really unlikely that it will happen. Unfortunately, that's just how it is. And it's super misogynistic too – that's how it's always been and I'm not going to



change that single handedly! If you haven't done something by then it's highly unlikely it's going to happen so I think that giving myself a cut-off of 40 is a safe bet to draw a line under the music and go into politics. In the interim I'll still be really active within my trade union and within, perhaps, the SNP. I'm currently a member, but things will change and I really quite like this Green cooperation that we've got going on. That's cool, maybe that'll be the party that I get more involved with as I grow older, who knows? I'm not too sure, that's not what I do right now but things might change, we might see new parties popping up. I'd really like to get a Grammy in folk music so that's a nice thing to aim for but if that doesn't happen by the time I'm 40 then I'd better just cut my losses and actually go and do the career in politics that I've always kind of maybe been itching for."

Meanwhile, Iona's music career still appears to be on an upward trajectory. As Covid restrictions ease off she's already returned to live performance, with a UK tour in November following straight on from her October tour in Denmark, and is already looking forward to Celtic Connections in February 2022. She's been nominated for Musician of the Year at the MG Alba Scots Trad Music Awards – "if you can get me mair votes that'd be amazing!" Her latest single, 'The Cauld', continues to get radio play and her plans for a second album of traditional ballads and a third album of more contemporary music are well advanced. "I'm in the process of writing a second and third album at the same time – which is a total shitemare! The second album is full of ballads that're 300 years old, which I'm kind of moving away from and I don't really have much passion about right now, and the third album's full of more folkie-pop songs that are kind of really catchy but are in Scots. I think that people who liked my previous works should be OK with this slick and subtle move, and I'll still be singing the traditional ballads. The pandemic has definitely affected my career in the fact I wasn't able to tour



Iona with sparkles on ready to perform

She's been nominated for Musician of the Year at the MG Alba Scots Trad Music Awards

for so long, but I have been able to do other things. Before I never had the opportunity to write columns or do more teaching or other things, and now I feel like I'm equipped with a far better skillset than before. I feel like I can work in different ways and I don't just have to run myself into the ground with touring constantly. It's actually made me feel more assured of myself as a musician with a portfolio career as opposed to just someone who sings and someone who can do a show. I underestimated myself so much and now I feel much more confident."

In last month's issue, Ally Heather said, "I've never particularly felt that I myself had much tae say", and now we have Iona saying, "I don't know if I've got much to write about or say" – is this just typically Scottish self-deprecation in action? I think it is, as these are two intelligent and articulate young people whose politics, moral compasses and sense of social justice are firmly shaped by their own lived experiences, and they're not shy in promoting the causes they believe in. There's a real authenticity to the words they write on a range of subjects – politics, language, elitism, misogyny, racism, union rights, independence – and they are committed to living their values. They are both inspirational, and exactly the kind of people that encourage me to believe that we are indeed living in the early days of a new nation. Would anybody like to bet against Iona's CV being extended to include 'Grammy Award Winner' and 'First Minister of the Republic of Scotland' in about 20 years?

iScot readers can check out Iona's tour dates and album releases at www.ionafyfe.com and support the progress towards a Scots Language Act at www.oorvyce.scot