

Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



Photo: John Savin@designfolk.com

A magical winter week in Glasgow

I ONCE read something somewhere about the spiritual power of making music in a group. The words I recall spoke to group music creation in a sacred sort of way. Making music with others joined energy and life forces and, well, made magic. Magic a word used here, I think, to describe the indescribable. And the indescribable, to me, usually stands as the best and worst things in life and, from time immemorial, inspirational fodder for the poet. Anyway, these hazy recollections stayed with me and it was only in the last week of January did they again burble up.

The *LiveInIreland87* tribute project — that which you'll know I was very involved in and that which you are probably getting pretty tired of hearing about — turned out to be a veritable living lab, one that explored in blazing Technicolor the serious magic connected with making music in a group; in this case, of course, a group of pipers and drummers.

First, it's worth saying that shared energy is a natural outcome of group music-making — no matter the group, no matter the level of musical proficiency. We make this energy any time we gather for a band practice or even play along with our teacher or another piper on the practice chanter. There's a connectedness and usually a level of concentration that sees shared music-making shield thoughts of the outside world, and if the stars align, makes us feel really good.

The energy isn't always good, I'd wager. We can all have bad days and uninspired tunes and miserable group music-making. But this is the exception; one that maybe helps proves the rule. And when it comes to theory, rules and science, don't believe me: the "magic" of group music-making is evidently widely explored in the academic world. Ethnomusicologist Dr Diane Thram believes that "two phenomena occur when people make music together: first, the bonding of each participants physical energy to the rhythmic flow of the music being created; and second, losing oneself in the act of musical expression and thereby achieving loss of self-consciousness — a shedding of the ego



as the individual becomes one with the group."

And so to my murky and magical winter week in Glasgow and the phenomena that came with it: bonding, physical energy, rhythmic flow, loss of self-consciousness and shedding of ego — and maybe a little beer. The group of people that came together for the *LiveInIreland87* project experienced all that — and, dare I say, even managed to realise a peak experience; that is, to become "one with the group". With a tip of the hat to John Wilson, safe to say all the boxes were ticked for an inspirational week in Glasgow — or anywhere.

But what did all that really look like? What did it feel like?

There were a lot of egos in the practice room and all of them pretty big. I don't buy the line often said when ad hoc teams of experts come together, you know, "everyone checked their ego at the door", and all that. Ego supports confidence, ego helps enable action and you can't make great art without ego. We had no shortage of that. But ego was tempered by humility because there was a uniform sense of mutual respect from one end of the practice room to the other.

I think, too, that because this project was

non-competitive performance-focused, there was a safeness in the collegial deference that every member set forward. There was lots of support and shared insight freely passed through the ranks. No secrets. No contest day us-against-them. While we had our assigned parts to play, no one person inappropriately exerted their will on another. This was especially true of the active band leaders — including Ross Walker here (he's far from inactive). It was a sight to see the "band tuners" come together as if in a quiet, determined mission. Richard Parkes was the nominated Last Word but the guys just quietly coalesced and smoothly and methodically — and here's that word again — magically — created a sound.

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the week was the evolution of the band's sound — including the ensemble, or overall, impact. From a group of people who had never played together on the Monday, with new reeds, chanters, drums and a two-hour show staring them in the face to Saturday's sonic sweetness. I think we were all pleasantly surprised. Not Richard, perhaps, but many of us were. If only you'd heard the Monday practice. The week was transformative. A lesson for me: people can make anything happen when an intention is set and followed without waver.

As the week progressed and the band got better, almost exponentially so with each passing day, the excitement and energy levels rose accordingly. By Friday night the rehearsal room atmosphere was electric. Harmonies locked in, rhythmic flow and groove joined as one. Self-consciousness was a distant memory and the group had become one — lost in the music and loving every minute of it.

A little like the golfer who achieves a hole in one and so, knowing he could do it, spends the rest of his life tramping the links to somehow recreate and again savour that sweet rare moment, I think I'm also stuck to forever seek out the magic, that feeling, the phenomena that was experienced on that big stage in Glasgow, January 30, 2016.

I wish the same magic for you one day soon. ●