

# Island music. ■ ■ ■ Half a World Away



**From Katie Macleod in New York**

It's not often I encounter a fellow Leodhasach (native of Lewis) in a New York City bar, let alone six of them at once – but that's exactly the situation I found myself in March 2018 at Rockwood Music Hall, located in Manhattan's trendy Lower East Side.

The tiny bar of Stage 1 was buzzing under dim red lights, the densely-packed crowd dancing, cheering, and filming the performance on their phones. Leodhasaich and New Yorkers alike were there to listen to Colin Macleod, the singer-songwriter from Point on the Isle of Lewis who, with his first gig in the Big Apple, was winding up his mini-USA tour after a string of performances at SXSW festival in Texas.

With his band – younger brother Callum on bass, Gordon Skene from Fort William on piano, and fellow islanders Scott Macleod on guitar and Murdo Mackenzie on drums – Colin opened the show with *Kicks In*, his most recent single. The song is an ode to the gap between childhood and adulthood, and the upbeat sound perfectly captures the bittersweet feeling of possibility that teenagers can feel as their school days come to a close.

"*Kicks In* is about us growing up," Colin tells me over coffee the next day. "We were all at the end of school, and we had this choice: are you staying on the island, or are you going to go?" Colin chose to stay, and pursue a music career, which left him wondering at the time when 'real life' would arrive while he was living at home, and his friends had moved to the mainland. "I don't know if kids go through that now as much, but definitely for people my age it was a real conflict."

I first heard Colin perform more than a decade ago, not long after he'd made that decision to stay, when he took to the stage at an An Lanntair showcase as 'The Boy Who Trapped The Sun.' Back then, I wrote in Stornoway's *EVENTS* newspaper that "despite his obvious talent, Colin doesn't take himself too seriously... The music in his voice is evident; his songs beautifully melodic."

Both observations still ring true all those years and many miles later. In New York Colin was relaxed on stage in between performing catchy songs from his upcoming album, *Bloodlines*, thanking people for coming, and joking that he had only expected two people to show up. "I probably shouldn't have said that on stage, I got a bit of a row for that afterwards," he laughs. "But it was brilliant, it was nice to see so many people."

From the powerful sound of *Shake The Walls*, to the sweet lyrics of *100 Miles*, and the emotion that surges through *Ria* – the final song of the night that saw the small space go silent in appreciation – Colin's music, which Creative Scotland recently described as having a "dream-like quality," has been getting positive reactions here in the USA, in NYC and beyond.

"I'd say it's indie rock with a little bit of a country influence, a bit of Americana," he says of the sound which flows through *Bloodlines*. Produced by Ethan Johns (who's worked with the likes of Kings of Leon and Paul McCartney), the album is set for release in May, and draws heavily on the culture and stories of the Isle of Lewis – stories that inspired Colin when he returned from a stint in London recording music in his early twenties.

"I loved London as a city, but my heart was always at home. I never really 'lived' anywhere else; it was more a case of 'I'm here just now and I'm enjoying it, but I'm going to go home eventually.'" Colin expected to move back to Lewis, and take a few months off from writing music before returning to his guitar; in the end, he didn't write a song for another two years.

"My priorities in life had changed. I'd grown up a little bit, settled down on the croft. I was quite happy and content, and it's quite hard to write a song when you're happy and content!" he says with another laugh. "I was wondering where to go with the album, and then I realised there were all these amazing stories from home."

The songs that make up *Bloodlines* range from tales of the Lewis Revival in the Forties to the Clearances of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a mix of the historical and personal. "The thing about Lewis is there's so much word of mouth, and so many good yarns," says Colin. "It's all 'Did you hear this?' and 'Did you hear that?'"

He started recording conversations with his elderly neighbour, picking out local tales, and once word got out – as it does – that he was writing music about island stories, he was inundated with them. "It's a rich vein. I think I could write albums for the rest of my days on stories from the Isle of Lewis. Once you tap into it it's like an oil well, there's just so much of it."

Although he's been playing music since his teenage years, Colin didn't always harbour the dream of becoming a musician. He initially wanted to be a gamekeeper, and spent summer holidays working on the Lewis estates. It was there his interest in playing music began to grow, as he joined in on jamming sessions in the evenings; eventually he decided to take the year off after school to play music. "Luckily my parents were very supportive," remembers Colin. "I think that really helped me fully commit to it, that was a big deal."

Now, it seems Colin has found his perfect balance: a record deal and burgeoning music career, combined with a settled life on his Lewis croft. "When I was younger, I thought you couldn't be a crofter and a musician, that was crazy. And now all anybody wants to talk about is the fact that I'm a crofter and a musician, it's hilarious!"

He'll be returning to the USA during 2018, to perform at Bonnaroo Festival in Tennessee, followed by an appearance on the legendary *Late Late Show* with James Corden in Los Angeles. As the saying goes, if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere – and Colin Macleod is on his way to success across The Pond.