



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

# Building our communities

## How Comhairle Ceilidhs unite Islanders across world

By Katie Macleod

**T**he music calendar in the Western Isles is usually packed year-round, with live music spilling out of pubs, arts centres, and festival tents – but it all fell silent in the wake of the national lockdown.

In April, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar stepped in to bring the music back, with the launch of online Comhairle Cèilidhs that gave islanders something to look forward to each weekend when the only option was to stay at home, and offered local musicians the chance to continue playing in front of a live audience.

Every Friday and Saturday at 9pm, island musicians such as Calum Martin, Iain 'Spanish' Mackay, and Norrie 'Tago' MacIver took to the Comhairle's Facebook page for hour-long live performances, broadcast from their living rooms to the world. Over 30 cèilidhs have been hosted in the last four months, with around 374,300 views from locations as close to home as Inverness and as far afield as Australia, Dubai, and Argentina.

And last month it was announced that despite the easing of lockdown restrictions, the cèilidhs would continue every Friday until the end of the year, following a Facebook poll in July which saw a huge demand for the live events to continue.

"We have consulted with many of the artists who have been performing over recent months, and without whom none of this would be possible, and have received an overwhelmingly positive response to the continuation of the cèilidh programme," says Colin George Morrison, Media Coordinator at the Comhairle. "It has been quite incredible to see how the artists have so willingly supported the communities of the Western Isles, and likewise how the communities have supported the artists."

"It's brought live music to an audience that maybe just don't want to go out to busy places anymore," says local singer-songwriter Willie Campbell, while local Gaelic singer Iain 'Costello' MacIver thanked the Comhairle Communications team "for allowing me an opportunity I otherwise wouldn't have had to perform my music during the



lockdown period."

So what has it been like for these local musicians to perform to a screen instead of a real-life crowd? "It's been funny in a way. Certainly I'm playing to way more people than I would be at one of my regular Friday or Saturday night gigs," says Willie. "You definitely have an awareness that there is a decently-sized audience watching you, but I've been at it so long I feel pretty relaxed, and after the first song or two I'm at ease and chatting between songs."

For Costello, it was a smooth transition, as he had already been teaching online and filming tutorial videos since lockdown began – although he was wary of how the internet where he lives would hold up. "The only difference with the cèilidhs is that you know the people are out there but you can't physically see them, whereas with teaching you can see your pupils on screen."

"The reaction of the audience is such a big part of the experience which is something you miss out on, but recording remotely also gives you the opportunity to be creative and experimental," says



Ceitlin Smith.

A unique benefit that comes from hosting the cèilidhs on Facebook is that the events become truly communal. Old friends who haven't seen each other in years reconnect in the comments, while praise rolls in for the performers from fans. It's that interaction between performer and viewer, and between the viewers themselves, that all the musicians I spoke to noted.

"It's been one of the best parts of the whole thing," says Willie. "I start every livestream with a set and at some point, it inevitably goes out the window because I've had multiple requests for songs – it's a fun night so I'm just happy to go with the flow. It's been pulling people together during a difficult time in a very real way, people that maybe haven't had contact with each other for years are listening to music and having a chat at the same time, it's been really cool to watch."

"It's great to see people interacting with each other with wee online conversations, but the comments are moving so fast it's sometimes difficult to follow them, and I always end up apologising to folk if I don't see their comments," adds Costello.

In a time when we have to be physically distant, there's something comforting about logging on to the Comhairle Cèilidhs each week and seeing family and friends watching along with you. As Willie says, they've "brought people together and taken our minds off the mad world for a few hours. They've been such a positive and constructive thing to be involved in."

Live music might not be back in streets of Stornoway quite yet, but in the meantime, we can enjoy the Comhairle cèilidhs from the comfort of our own homes – whether that's in Canada or Callanish.



Willie Campbell on stage at the Hebridean Celtic Festival.



Costello, left, in happier times.