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The Proclaimers at 60

Craig and Charlie Reid on pop, politics and the passing of time

I've never worried about us being too political in the same way I've never worried about us being too sentimental

Craig and Charlie Reid are back with a new album, the most political from the Proclaimers in years, they tell **Aidan Smith**. The twins talk about the evolution of *Dentures Out* against a backdrop of what they see as the near terminal decline of Britain, the frustrations of the stalled independence movement, turning 60 and failing to see their beloved Hibs win the Scottish Cup.

Portraits by **Michael Gillen**

Faith, hope, trust – all gone. Our politicians are dirty rotten scoundrels. They parted while we isolated and they staged a never-ending popularity contest or simply holidayed while we fretted about the world ending. Who can possibly save us? Well, come with me, for down a close and up a stairwell in Edinburgh's Haymarket, I think I may have found the guys ...

About ten minutes into my chat with the Proclaimers it seems like a no-brainer: Craig and Charlie Reid should be running the country. Which country? As believers in indy as opposed to indie, that would almost certainly be Scotland – and maybe the rest of Britain's loss.

You know how Boris Johnson wasn't a details man? That if his spads' briefings stretched to more than one Post-It he'd forget everything? The Reids are red-hot on all the stuff needed to back up their arguments.

"Did you see that forecast about

the likely effects of the US's money-printing policy?" says Charlie, apropos of something else entirely. "Inflation is going to cut living standards in America by 50 – that's five-zero – per cent."

I never got this vital info when I interviewed Oasis or Kasabian – and certainly not the Proclaimers' peers from their 1980s beginnings: preposterous fops like Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet and Blue Rondo à la Turk. What a contrast these acts made with our boys in their specs and pullovers, straight outta Auchtermuchty. "Aye, we stuck out like sore bloomin' thumbs back then," smiles Craig. "But then as twins we always have."

The Reids would have to be a dream-ticket double-act, sworn into office together, taking parliamentary questions as a twosome. And, surely this is in their favour in a political context, given they don't indulge in it in a musical context – there would be no mud-slinging.

Craig again: "We made a conscious decision even before we signed our first record deal, before anyone had heard from us, that we were never going to slag off other bands. That'll always come back to bite you."

Here's something else they have over the existing political classes: they are not carpet-baggers for football teams. That is, they don't pretend to follow the game, only for credentials to quickly unravel.

Tony Blair waxed lyrical about a Newcastle United legend he was too young to have seen play. David Cameron declared allegiance to West Ham United ... or was it Aston Villa? Anyway, they're the ones in claret and sky blue - ra ra ra! At least Gordon Brown has sound football credentials, having sold match programmes at Raith Rovers as a boy, but he allowed himself to be tripped up over music with a claim he liked to rouse himself for a bowl of cold porridge and an itinerary of Presbyterian thrift with a blast of the Arctic Monkeys. Clearly

his PR department told him to say this. Craig and Charlie, though, are followers of Hibernian. The most authentic celebrity fans anywhere on Planet Football. (Even though they missed their team's greatest day, of which more later ...).

So, come on guys, you've got my vote, when will you be seeking joint nomination? There's a shaking of heads in unison before Charlie says: "Naw, we'd have to compromise. That's the way it works in democracies. In theocracies and also dictatorships. And I'm afraid that if you look at political life in Britain, you would not come to the conclusion that much has changed for the benefit of the many. That's despite the good people in politics who've tried to make a difference. It's all going further and further to the right."

Well, that seems a shame, especially when you listen to the twins' new album. *Dentures Out* is their 12th but the way it doesn't hang about with only one of the 13 songs



extending beyond three minutes – no backbencher waffle here – there’s all the exuberance of a debut. On record, the Proclaimers are lots of words beginning with p: punchy, punky, passionate, profound – and above all political. And they’re the same in person in their rehearsal studio, in jeans and polo shirts, while limbering up for a tour extending right through to Christmas.

Back in March the pair turned 60. We share a laugh reflecting on the fad for birthdays becoming almost week-long celebrations. Says Craig: “I just had the three of my kids who live in Scotland round for a meal in the house and we Zoomed the other one.” Charlie, evidently the most decadent of the two, marked the day at a pub. “It was me, my three sons and granddaughter and, er, one ex-wife. Nae fuss. My kids have got better things to do with their money than spend it on presents for me.”

Did they ever think they’d still be a-strumming and a-hollering heading into their seventh decade? “Definitely not,” says Craig. “I don’t think we even thought we’d get to 40,” adds Charlie.

Craig again: “We’d just turned 25 when we signed our deal and all I thought about was making that first record. Beyond was ... we had no bloody idea.”

And Charlie: “All we knew was that making music was better than being on the dole, which had been us for most of the previous six years. Sixty? Our dad was still grafting away on building sites at that age, took ill at 61 and was dead at 63. Compared to him and what he had to do in his working life we’ve been real lucky.”

In one of the new songs, The Recent Past, the boys sing of “Eighties pop stars who thought they would last/ Now in Butlin’s can be seen”. A jibe? No, more an admission of “There but for the grace of God ...” “We’re acknowledging that one day that could be us,” admits Craig.

Around the turn of the century this paper sent me to Brighton to report on one of the first 1980s revival tours. Backstage you could have cut the edgy atmosphere with Adam Ant’s swishing cutlass. Spandau weren’t talking to ABC who weren’t talking to Toyah. Perhaps, I tell the boys, everyone was slightly resentful about being retro-packaged when there were still hopes of comebacks under their own steam. “I can imagine what that was like,” says Charlie, “but we’ve just played an Eighties festival in Ostend with Kid Creole and the Coconuts and it was fine. Back in the day, who was a bit up themselves? I remember Kylie [Minogue] and Jason [Donovan] ... he could be grumpy but he was always pleasant to us. Bros? They were lovely guys. Some bands could be f****n’ difficult right enough but of course we don’t talk about those ones.”

It was in 1987, when the New Romantics were hastily attempting to cast off frivolousness and court



Charlie and Craig Reid, main; Charlie at Easter Road in 2015 with Kenny MacAskill and Leeann Dempster, then chief executive of Hibs, top; the twins showing their support for the SNP, above; playing at Edinburgh Castle in 2019, top right

grown-up audiences, that the Proclaimers announced themselves with Letter From America. Other British bands of the period were aping US ones and referencing “freeways” in their songs but here were twin brothers not much caring how gawky they looked and in their gloriously unvarnished mother tongue – a bit ‘Muchtig, a bit Leith – singing of Methil, Bathgate, Linwood and other casualty towns of the industrial devastation wrought by Margaret Thatcher.

Did everyone get that? Craig, who’s long since grown into his looks, like his brother, muses on the possibility of some who bought the single thinking it just a random list song or a travel guide in the Berlitz pocket style. “It sold well in England and maybe down there they didn’t know what we were banging on about but, you know, that’s fine.” Charlie considers the political dimension: “I wonder if, released today, Letter From America would even get played on the radio because the BBC are just terrified of the right wing.”

I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles) is the Proclaimers’ great singalong song, Let’s Get Married their great wedding song and Sunshine on Leith the greatest song ever appropriated

by tearily delirious football fans – but throughout they’ve always confronted politics, such as with Cap in Hand, an anthem for the indie movement with its pressing question: “I can’t understand why we let someone else rule our land, cap in hand.”

Dentures Out, though, is the most concentratedly political they’ve been in a while. “You’d have to go back seven or eight albums,” Charlie reckons.

This one opens with the title track and a hilariously grim perusal of the state of the nation: “Britain’s old and rather thin/I saw her with her dentures out, she put them in/And mumbled something indistinct which might have been/‘Nostalgia I love you’.”

Craig sets out the manifesto: “I think this is a massively declining country. In western Europe post-Second World War, it’s the most obviously diminished. It’s got worse in the last ten years but the most disastrous turn it made was voting in Maggie Thatcher. We’ve never recovered from the centre ground shifting massively to the right. There was the famous quote from her later when, asked for her greatest achievement, she replied: ‘Tony Blair.’ Labour never

shifted the ground back and they’re not going to do so now.

“We accept shoddiness in this country,” he continues, “and we accept greed and do nothing about it. Now Boris Johnson has laid down a marker similar to Donald Trump in America. How low can they possibly go? Johnson has taken [the position of premier] so low that anyone who’s slightly better, despite the lying and cheating and whatever that might come with them, is going to seem acceptable. I really do think that in Britain’s case the decline is terminal.”

When I posit the theory – probably pointless in respect of these guys – that we’re all supposed to get more right-wing as we get older, Charlie picks up the theme: “I never bought [1980s Toryism] then. Trickle-down? Didnae buy it. Privatisation? Didnae buy it. There was a plea in mitigation: ‘Ah but Scotland’s problem was that Thatcherism was not communicated well enough.’ No, Scots understood it perfectly well and rejected it.”

Nostalgia also gets a kicking in The World That Was, which takes issue with a Spitfire airborne during the pandemic with “Thank U NHS” painted on its wings. Even though the health service is, says Craig, “the single greatest achievement of

any UK government”, even though Spitfires helped stop the Nazis, and stressing that they’re not in any way anti-British, he thought the gesture – and the business of nostalgia being pressed into service during lockdown with many other illusions to wartime – as “just a bit creepy”.

Newspaper barons – no prizes for guessing which way they lean – are targeted on Things As They Are. Meanwhile Drop Dead Destiny includes these killing lines: “You’re a washed-up illusion ... A bellicose voice, untroubled by charm ... When you’ve finally departed, I’ll sing a song at your wake.” Boris, perhaps?

Craig again: “A couple of folk have said that, but it’s not directly about him.” To which Charlie adds: “If the cap fits, though ...” And they have more to say about Johnson today, with Craig insisting that “never again” should an Old Etonian be allowed to lead the country. “Every country has suffered because of Covid, the war in Ukraine and the economic downturn but we’re spiralling right out of control. And yet what does this total f****r do? Swans off on two – two! – holidays while his party takes what seems like 30 bloody years to elect a new leader!”

Probably none of these songs,

though enjoyably sarcastic and often thrilling, will end up being sung at weddings but the Proclaimers are unabashed in their need to explore big and often gloomy themes. Craig: “I’ve never worried about us being too political in the same way I’ve never worried about us being too sentimental.” Still we might ask, present company excepted, where have all the political songs gone? “It’s strange,” says Charlie. “I don’t think the big issues occur [to other songwriters] until they hit. We’re of a generation, Scots our age from bands who experienced unemployment, knew about industrial unrest and were aware of their history. But I don’t know ... folk drifted away. The s***’s about to fit the fan, though. The problems in this country in terms of growth and productivity are frighteningly bad. Brits are going to find out soon enough that they’re not as well off as they think. And [songwriters] who thought [politics] didn’t matter to them so they haven’t been engaged with it ... maybe they’ll be f****n’ engaged very quickly.”

“Some bands overstay their welcome, we don’t want to be one of them”



Would Scotland on its own fare any better? Charlie says they’ve always stayed true to their desire for independence, although persuading the waverers when “we could be facing a bigger economic meltdown than 1929” will be difficult.

“Hell will have to freeze over before Westminster grants us another referendum but this begs the question: in a party like the SNP which is supposed to be chock-full of lawyers, how can our revolutionary idea be advanced? How can another avenue be found within peaceful politics which will take us to where we want to be? The party needs to be asking these questions now.

“There are two people I won’t ever openly criticise: one is the manager of Hibernian Football Club and the other is the First Minister. I don’t know whether [Nicola Sturgeon] is about to resign because she’s certainly been making noises. She’s had a long go at it, under incredibly high pressure and having to withstand so much abuse, and I wouldn’t blame her for walking away.

“The issue then becomes: is there anyone of her class, her stature, who can take over? I’m not really sure about that so where the movement goes in the next few years is going to be crucial. We’re nearly there but we’re not there. It’s a kind of purgatory!”

The other purgatory – lockdown – frustrated the Reids as it did all musicians and in their case produced a lovely song called Sundays by John Calvin which recalls the Sabbath decree of their childhood of playground swings being tied up to prevent use. Unchained, the twins’ first post-Covid show saw nerves give way, for the third song, to tears.

Turning 60, though, prompted reflection and this question: how long do we keep Proclaiming?

“Some bands overstay their welcome,” says Charlie, “and we don’t want to be one of them. We feel as good as we ever did right now but in two years’ time it might be different and in ten years’ time it’s bound to be.

“There’s a fairly good chance for either one of us our health will give out. We’re aware, for instance, that we’re soon approaching the age of

our dad when he died. I don’t think we want to be like Solomon Burke, still performing but stuck in a chair. For one thing, black guys look good in a white suit, even vastly overweight and unable to move – we wouldn’t. And I don’t think you want to be on stage needing oxygen – that kind of diminishes the act!”

But in one sense they’ve achieved everything. The Proclaimers have experienced Hibs winning the Scottish Cup, even if they weren’t there to see it happen.

Previously they’d always told their manager to avoid booking a gig which would clash with the final, but after numerous disappointments and the occasional disaster, had begun to prefer working on that day. So it was that in 2016 they were 350 miles from Hampden in Wiltshire and the cathedral city of Salisbury.

What, I say, the scene of the poisonings of that ex-Russian double agent and his daughter? “Aye,” laughs Craig, “and the night before the show I wanted to have dinner in the Italian restaurant where the dark deed happened – how Hibsie is that?”

Pre-concert, the twins kept up with the final’s progress on a roadie’s laptop running seven minutes behind. The dramatic finale of an injury-time winner enabled Hibs to hoist the trophy for the first time in 114 years. Says Craig: “We’d been carrying this weight on our shoulders and suddenly it was gone – for the whole of our lifetime.” Charlie describes the joy thus: “I don’t take LSD but would imagine the feeling was similar – just the biggest trip.”

In the crowd a fellow fan wore his Hibs strip with pride. “Even if we’d been playing Addis Ababa there would have been someone in a green and white top and this guy was holding a dreadful – beautifully dreadful – paper cut-out of the cup. You know, the births of your weans are supposed to top everything in life, but I’ve told my kids and grandkids that my greatest moment was Hibs winning the cup. Our work is kind of done ...”

Dentures Out is released on Cooking Vinyl on Friday. For tour dates see theproclaimers.co.uk. See review, Page 20

ALBUMS

Plenty of fight

On their first album in four years, Craig and Charlie Reid make like a two-pronged Billy Bragg, taking aim at topics general and specific

Fiona Shepherd



POP
The Proclaimers: Dentures Out
Cooking Vinyl
★★★★

Muse: Will of the People
Warner Records
★★★★

Julian Lennon: Jude
BMG
★★★★

Slim Wrist: Closer for Comforting
self-released
★★★★

As surely as Bob Dylan will show up in your town at some point on his never-ending world tour, so **The Proclaimers** continue their run of regular quality album releases and this time, four years on from previous release *Angry Cyclist*, there is further grist to their mill.

The title *Dentures Out* might conjure images of some mediocre Seventies sitcom, but it is precisely that nostalgia for some mythical, cosy, rosy past that the Reid brothers are railing against with their usual pithiness and perspicacity (not least on *The World That Was*). They are on amped-up form on their 12th studio album which is powered by anger and disgust and delivered with turbo-charged tunes, upbeat arrangements and singing, ringing guitars.

The title track is jaunty and witty, yet deadly serious in its critique of Brexit Britain as a doddering old woman – apologies to the doddering old women of the nation. This is hardly new critical territory, but is executed with their usual flair for smart, satirical rhyming couplets.

Manic Street Preachers frontman James Dean Bradfield adds his guitar-slissing skills to the title track and

Things As They Are, a Manics-like sweeping orchestral ballad with the right wing press in its firing line. The twins look back themselves but with zero fondness on *Sundays By John Calvin* (“when they tied up all the swings”). This is their *Every Day Is Like Sunday* with bonus beautiful undulating guitar work. Elsewhere, they make like a two-pronged Billy Bragg, taking aim at topics general and specific.

Muse are on equally fiery, familiar form on their ninth album, though their targets are global, even galactic and require bigger musical guns. *Will of the People* doesn't break any new ground for the power prog trio; instead, they rip off their old favourites with glee and élan.

The title track chant is essentially Marilyn Manson's *Beautiful People* with a lighter, more traditional glam rock character. *Kill Or Be Killed* is pummelling tech metal with frontman Matt Bellamy in fleet vocal form, Verona an exultant electro ballad with soaring vocals and Euphoria an urgent celebration of, well, celebration with plentiful Brian May-style riffola.

The utterly OTT *Liberation* is another nod to Queen while *You Make Me Feel Like It's Halloween* is hysterical baroque rock. **Muse** have been heralding the apocalypse for the past 20 years – here they surpass themselves with *We Are F***ing F***ed*, guaranteed to be a live singalong favourite.

Julian Lennon has devoted more time to philanthropy than music in the past decade. However, his latest album *Jude* has been germinating

Lennon revisits old songs and new material to reclaim the pet name immortalised by Paul McCartney



for the past five years, with Lennon revisiting old songs and writing new material in readiness to reclaim the pet name immortalised by Paul McCartney when he addressed him as a five-year-old in *Hey Jude*.

The result is a confident collection of slick prog pop, at times reminiscent of *Tears for Fears*. The Lennon family resemblance is clear in the lavish but whimsical orchestral pop of *Not One Night and Love Don't Let Me Down* is the kind of balladry to which Gary Barlow aspires, though Lennon's co-writer here is Robbie Williams' former wingman Guy Chambers. The album ends on sultry highlight *Gaia*, a reworking of a Bill Laurance instrumental with guest vocals from Blue Nile's Paul Buchanan and Swiss singer Elissa Lauper.

Fern Morris and Brian Pokora, the Edinburgh duo formerly known as *Super Inuit*, regroup as electro pop outfit **Slim Wrist**. Their debut album *Closer for Comforting* is described by the band as the calm after the storm and delivers with clean lines and delicate purpose, from the clear, bright sound of *The Soft* via the beatific chimes and hums of *Folds* to the darker synth pulse of *Milk Teeth*.

Ken Walton

CLASSICAL
Haydn Piano Sonatas, Vol 11
Chandos
★★★★

Haydn's piano sonatas look, and often sound, deceptively simple. But as the 11th and final volume in Jean-Efflam Bavouzet's 11-year project to record them in the company of other miscellaneous piano works readily illustrates, it takes a probing intellect to fathom the magic behind the notes. Not that Bavouzet's programme in this final disc eschews the sparkly surface economy of Haydn's crystalline Classicism. Yes, there is something more Beethovenesque in the power-driven chords and harmonic adventure of the final *Sonata No 62*, but even with the more direct, lithesome naivety of such earlier sonatas as *No 1 in G Major*, Bavouzet's musical curiosity draws rare fascination from the leanest of textures. It's useful to have such freer inventions as the folk-inspired *Capriccio in G* and the *Allegretto in G* (originally for musical clock) as comparisons, the latter quirkily over-pedalled to allude to its mechanical origins.

FOLK
Brighde Chaimbeul, Ross Ainslie, Steven Byrnes: LAS
Great White Records
★★★★

This collaboration sees celebrated pipers Brighde Chaimbeul and Ross Ainslie join Irish guitarist Steven Byrnes, featuring two sets of smallpipes, unusually in the key of C. The effect is beguiling as they work up deftly intertwining harmonies, right from the opening *Green Light* set, which develops pace from a plangently keening air. Chaimbeul's interest in Bulgarian piping manifests itself in two tracks, twin pipes bickering over the Byrnes's guitar drive, echoing the chirping character of the Bulgarian instrument. Further self-composed material includes Chaimbeul's gently ambling composition *The Badger*, paired with the nimble *Weasel*. They also range over more traditional material such as a set of strathspeys and reels and a thoughtfully measured, pipes only account of the jig *John Patterson's Mare*. “Las” means to burn or ignite, and there's plenty of fire here, tempered with precision.

Jim Gilchrist



Murdo Macleod, Robert Ascroft, Nick Fancher

FOLK

Historic Hebridean songs brought to life on new album



Jim Gilchrist

You feel as if you're entering another realm, culturally and temporally, as Fiona J Mackenzie's new album opens with the sounds of a Calmac ferry disembarking, footsteps crunching up a gravel path amid birdsong, snatches of distant fiddle and pipe music, then you're over the threshold and into the ceilidh.

The album is *Tac'an Teine* – “The Fireside” (Greentrax Recordings), an encapsulation of the Gaelic singer's years of working with the invaluable Hebridean song collections and recordings amassed by John Lorne Campbell, folklorist, farmer and laird of Canna, and his American wife, collector and photographer Margaret Fay Shaw.

Mackenzie has been working on the Canna collections for some three decades, the last seven of them as official archivist at Canna House, now in the care of the National Trust for Scotland, along with the rest of the Inner Hebridean island (where her husband, Donald, is harbourmaster).

She first encountered the fabled collectors' work in 1996 when she bought a copy of Margaret Fay Shaw's *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*. “I was immediately enraptured with what she had done, not just with the songs but with the whole lifestyle that the book portrayed. It became my Gaelic song bible.”

Her interest continued until in 2011, when, as Gaelic artist in residence with the National Theatre of Scotland, she put together a show about Fay Shaw's life called *Little Bird Blown Off Course*. “As part of that I was able to visit Canna for the first time and became very friendly with the then archivist Magda Sagarzazu, who was a wonderful lady.”

Sagarzazu, a Basque whose father had been a close friend of Campbell's, had to retire due to ill health. At her suggestion, Mackenzie applied for the job and duly moved to Canna in 2015 as official archivist, employed by the NTS, “which is just a wonderful privilege.”

With several albums under her belt, basing one on the 1,500 recordings



Fiona J Mackenzie on the shore in front of Canna House

in which she was immersed seemed an obvious choice but, owing to their unique importance, she was in no hurry to do so. Also, she didn't want arrangements to take precedence over the voices: “It's not about me as a singer at all. This is a tribute to the voices that have gone before us.” She wanted the original singers “to shine through”.

Consequently spare but effective

“It's not about me as a singer at all. This is a tribute to the voices that have gone before us”

settings come from just a few musicians including her daughter Katie Mackenzie on clarsach and piano and her son-in-law James Duncan Mackenzie (formerly of Breabach). The newly recorded music is intertwined with archive sounds of the original singers, such as Pèigi Macrae and Annie MacDonald, as well as their introductions and, not infrequently, ribald banter. Other engaging incursions range from an irate cat to Canna House's impressively chiming music box.

There's a wonderful moment when, at the end of Mackenzie's plaintive singing of *An Gille Donn* – The

Brown-Haired Lad, we hear through the vintage recorder's crackle the piano playing then singing of Fay Shaw herself, recorded at her 100th birthday party in Canna House in 2003.

“She was a redoubtable character,” says Mackenzie. “She was completely blind by that time. That song was her party piece and she always had her book, *Folksongs and Folklore*, sitting on the piano open at that page.”

She laughs: “If I sit at that piano now, I feel like she's sitting there beside me and correcting me – ‘No, no, you're not singing that quite right!’”

Lorne Campbell died in 1996, Fay Shaw in 2004. Today, the island's population fluctuates around 17, with Mackenzie currently its only permanent fluent Gaelic-speaking resident. What is more positive, however, is that Canna House, currently closed until 2024 for remedial works, will re-open with new, dedicated research facilities – which, says Mackenzie, is what the Campbells wanted for the collections. “*Tac'an Teine* may be often movingly elegiac, evoking a bygone way of life, but it also flags up the enduring importance of the Canna House Archive.

Tac'an Teine – “The Fireside” is out now on Greentrax Recordings, www.greentrax.com