

# Brian McNeill

[Brian's Website](#)

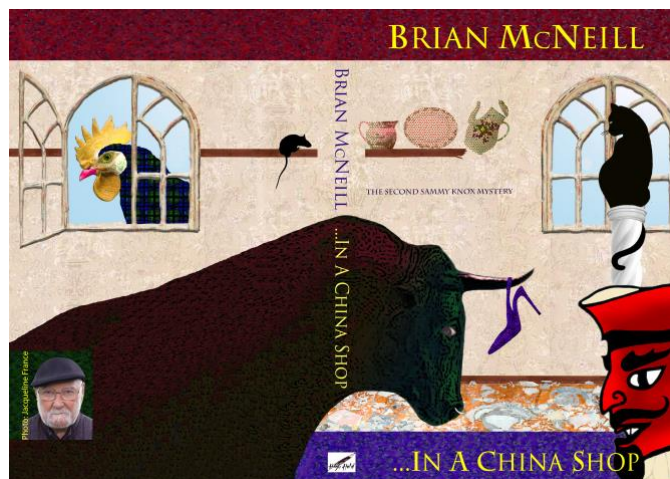
[brianebmcneill@gmail.com](mailto:brianebmcneill@gmail.com)



Hello everyone, welcome to the latest newsletter. Apologies that the promised last one - April, where on earth did the time go? - didn't materialise. I plead pressure of work.

First, news. ...*In A China Shop*, the second Sammy Knox mystery, is finished and will be available from [Amazon](#) (eBook and paperback) and the Brian McNeill website (paperback, signed and/or dedicated if you wish) very shortly. The sequel to ...*In The Grass*, ...*In A China Shop* has been an absolute ball to write, and

with luck, the multitude of demonic twists and turns will intrigue everyone who reads it as much as they intrigued me while I was writing it. I didn't start it with any fixed template of character or plot in mind, which is risky, but it did give me the freedom to make the jumps in the story more anarchic. As many of you know, other musical and writing projects have got in the way of this novel being finished, but in the end, the delays were no bad thing, allowing time for a necessary dose of editing. I've taken the liberty of including the paperback cover here in its entirety - it does pile on the clues rather nicely. A paperback edition of ...*In The Grass* (previously on Authorhouse) will also appear very soon.



The other great news is that there is finally - whisper it very softly and cross your fingers



- a live gig on the horizon! In fact, two gigs on the same day! [New Forest Folk Festival](#) has included me in their afternoon concert on Sunday, July 11th, and has also booked [Feast of Fiddles](#) - shown in artistic rural repose here on the



left - to round off the festival that night. My set was carried over from last year's cancellation and I'm delighted at the prospect of it happening at last. This is a lovely festival, eclectic in its choice of music, with a really friendly ethos. Having played it several times before, I recommend it very highly. I know a lot of work has gone into the site and facilities, not to mention the organisation, and Nick Curtis and the whole festival team are determined to make it a great event.

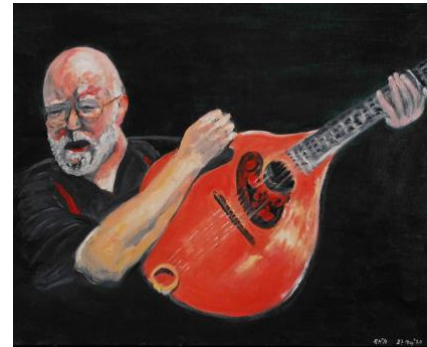
As far as other musical work goes, the obscurity of our current so-called government's idiot policy on touring in Europe - one of my main markets - is a huge bureaucratic hurdle to overcome. The financial barriers they've thrown up amount to what is essentially, by means of visas and costly import-export licences, a ban. [The Musicians' Union](#) is campaigning tirelessly to get this overturned, and has huge support, but always needs more. Please support them if you can, because there is absolutely no doubt that the whole British music industry has been simply thrown under the bus in the name of Brexit dogma. My sympathy goes to fellow musicians across Europe facing similar difficulties.



So I can only apologise to all my European friends for my continued absence from their civilised venues. (I've already had to turn down one tour, to my great chagrin.) However, my other projects are still ticking over nicely. The short story recordings are slowly coming to fruition, songs are being written for the next album, and I'm working on the first of my proposed song and tune books. Also, discussions are underway for me to do more online teaching for SPAE, the [Scottish Partnership for Arts and Education](#) in St. Louis. I hope that can go ahead - although I'll really miss visiting the schools and the city for a second year.

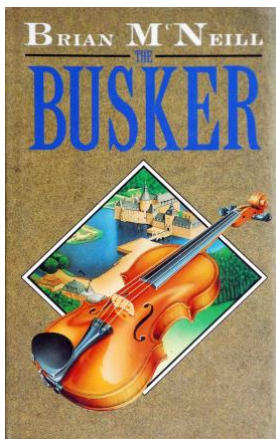


And now I have something rather pleasant to share with you. My great mentor at the (then) Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Rita McAllister, (The first boss I ever had; may all of you who report to someone above you be so lucky), is an excellent painter, and she has paid me the great compliment of committing



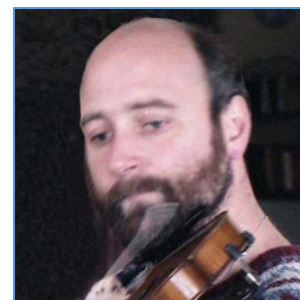
me to canvas. The two pictures shown here were meant to be a surprise for my 70th birthday last year, but the pandemic got in the way, so I've only just received them. I confess to being proud, humbled and touched all at once. Thank you, Rita!

To return to the writing... I'm asked regularly where the ideas for my two strands of novels came from, so here goes.



The [\*Busker series\*](#) began during one of the Battlefield Band's endless seventies tours of Europe. (Why did they always seem to happen in the depths of winter?) We were in Basel, staying with friends for a few days between gigs. To fill the time (and the coffers, money was incredibly tight) I decided some busking - panhandling to my American and Canadian friends - would be in order. The place to do this was the *Freie Strasse* pedestrian precinct, where the generosity of the Swiss burghers soon began filling my fiddle case, and after two freezing hours, just as I was about to leave, another busker arrived and stationed himself opposite me; an elderly man, wearing an immaculate overcoat and an astrakhan hat. He was carrying an accordion case, a small rucksack and a folding card table. He took out a camping stool, set up the table and put a tablecloth and a ceramic bowl on it. Then, in a stunning display of virtuosity, he played everything from French waltzes to Argentinian tangos with a skill I could only envy. Inside ten minutes he'd made as much as I did in my two hours.

I watched him for the next three days, drinking in his talent and learning as much as I could from him, and on the morning we were due to leave, I finally decided I had to go and talk to the man.

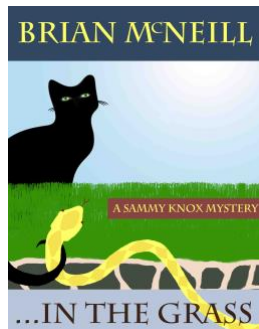


He never appeared.

I've kicked myself ever since for waiting too long, but the fact that the man remained



a mystery did give me the best possible gift - speculating about him inspired the crucial character of Max in *The Busker*. The rest of the series came from (and is still coming from) my own half century as a travelling musician. The photo shows me in my busking days, and the cover shown above is from *The Busker's* first edition.



The second strand, the [Sammy Knox series](#) was much longer in the making - and at first, of course, I had no idea it was being made at all. It began when I was a pupil at Falkirk High School, back in the distant sixties. The school's well-stocked library was pretty much where I lived (they used to have to throw me out at the end of the day) and it's where I discovered the novels of [Andre Norton](#) (1912-2005). These books were a revelation - full of exotic worlds, populated by wise and seductive talking beasts. I devoured them all and searched out new ones wherever I could.

Over the years, a unquenchable addiction to private eye fiction mixed itself into that memory. Spice that with a love of Gary Larson's anarchic [Far Side](#) animal cartoons, stir in a healthy comic scepticism about the supernatural, simmer for a good half century, and there you have it - Sammy Knox, private eye and witch's familiar.

And I do have to say that although I'm still the same down-to-earth Falkirk Bairn who haunted that school library, I now find creating alternative realities to be the best of fun.

So, time for memory lane. I'm indebted to Jos Hirst, Battlefield's sound man in the early eighties for the picture on the right. The venue is somewhere in the United States - West Virginia? Ohio? Pennsylvania? - and it's before a gig. And, frankly, that is the only thing I can remember about it. But the legend above our heads really does say it all. I'm pretty sure we were unwitting about the sign, but it doesn't really matter if we weren't, and at least it shows what the world has always suspected - that Alan Reid and Brian McNeill were always, in sartorial terms, right at the cutting edge...



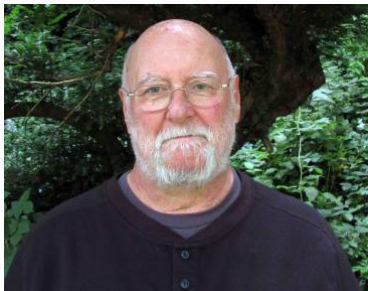
Let me leave you with a last image. One of the few pluses of the recent situation has been having the time to connect more with nature, something which a musician's frenetic life has never encouraged - you're always in some kind of motion, your day's always relentlessly hemmed in by get-ins and soundchecks and motorways. This fine Northumbrian field, captured by my wife Jacqueline's sharp eye and my own application of digital technology, is stunning. I hope that wherever you are, you've found something as bonny as this

to look at, and enough calm to take your time doing it.

My thanks to Jacqueline and Jos for the great images - and as always, let me repeat that this newsletter never goes out unsolicited. Anyone on the list has been personally invited to join. If you decide you no longer want to receive it, please let me know and I'll remove your name. And if you know anyone you think might like to be added, please ask them to email me at the above address.

So, wherever you are, cherish those close to you, take all the health advice (from those who know what they're talking about!) and stay safe and sane.

And, as always, I'd really enjoy hearing from you.



All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian", with a long horizontal line underneath it.