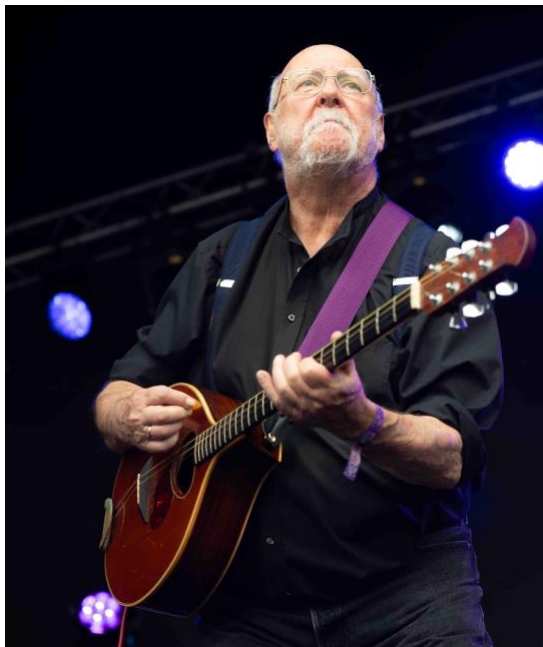


# Brian McNeill

[Brian's Website](#)

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



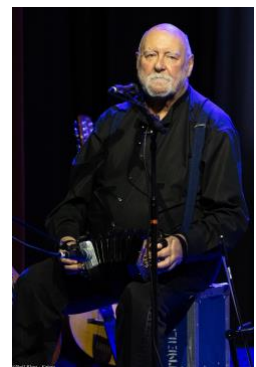
Hello everyone, I hope you're all well and enjoying the spring weather and some good music.

For myself, I've been battling with a certain amount of frustration. There are times when life does seem determined to throw a very fast curve ball, and it's usually at the least opportune moment.

The first of these came entirely without warning. In reply to repeated enquiries from many of you, I can only say that I have no detailed knowledge about the cancellation of this year's [Cambridge Folk Festival](#), apart from a somewhat impersonal email out of the blue.

That it seems to be about money is no secret, and I can only hope that the expressed intention of bringing it back next year will hold true. Those of you who've been getting my newsletter for a long time know how much I love this event, and how important I believe it is to the scene as a whole. Wearing my hat proudly as the festival's longest-running consecutively booked artist, all I will say to those holding the purse strings and making the decisions is, be brave—and remember how many around the world love and rely on this great festival.

I started my year determined to finish my current solo album. (I know methods of delivery have moved on, but I don't care—to me a collection of tracks is always going to be an album!) I've been working on it sporadically, between tours and other projects, for over eighteen months now. As I've



said before, I'm doing a mixture of new and old. The live concertina arrangement of [\*Trains And My Grandfather\*](#) is done, and I'm very pleased with it. Several tunes I wrote a while ago, but never got round to recording, have also been laid down, most of them inspired by my work in America and Europe. Also, I've been busy writing new music for the album.

However, the next curve ball hit me in mid-January, just as I was getting into my studio stride. My trusty recording setup decided that I'd ignored its pain for too long and promptly gave up the ghost. Fortunately, no recorded material was lost, but by the time I'd worked out exactly what the problem was and bought the requisite



replacement kit, I'd lost half the month, and other commitments were looming. However, I was soon back in the saddle and recording a new song, *Britannia Waives The Rules*, with my old friend and collaborator [\*Rod Sinclair\*](#). His trademark frailing banjo has given the piece exactly what it needed, and he also added his excellent nylon-strung guitar to a wonderful song I've been determined to record for years.

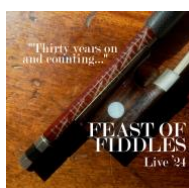


*Face The Foe* began life as the poem [\*Til Ungdommen\*](#) (For The Youth) by the Norwegian writer [\*Nordahl Grieg\*](#), an ex-communist who became one of his country's most celebrated and effective anti-fascists. He died working as a war correspondent in an allied air raid over Berlin in 1943, and his remains were only identified after the war. The tune is by Danish composer *Otto Mortensen*. Rod gave the song its title, and has been responsible for its ever-widening popularity. You can hear his own version on the fine album *SULA: Over Seas*.



As far as my writing goes, there's no change to the situation with *Forfaulted* (number five in the [\*Busker Series\*](#)) I'm still waiting for other people to make their decisions. However, ...*Out Of The Bag*, the third of the [\*Sammy Knox Series\*](#), is growing as fast as it can, given that it's being squeezed in between other work. I am, though, enjoying writing it immensely.

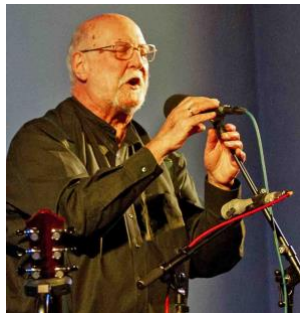
On the performing front, I've just finished an excellent tour with [\*Feast of Fiddles\*](#). Musically as diverse as ever, this year we chose a [\*Francis Monkman\*](#) *Curved Air* piece as our opener, his wonderful theme from the film [\*The Long Good Friday\*](#), followed by a jig from our late and much missed fellow band member, [\*Alan Whetton\*](#), *Statement Of Intent*. Fine music, challenging to arrange



and play. We also had a lovely [Sandy Denny](#) song, *Solo*, from [Marion Fleetwood](#), and great new instrumental pieces led by [Garry Blakely](#) and [Simon Swarbrick](#)—I have to say it'll be a long time before Simon's *Lizard On A Log* leaves my head. Much of the rest of our material can be found on our new live album *Thirty Years On And Counting*.

This year the tour wasn't quite as far-reaching geographically as previous ones, going no further north than Nottingham, but that didn't apply to me, as I took the unusual step of missing a few gigs mid-tour to accept a solo booking. The logistics involved—Nottingham to Perth to Sevenoaks—were a challenge, but as far as I was concerned, it was well worth it.

[Glenfarg Folk Feast](#) isn't one of Scotland's biggest festivals, but it's definitely one of its most prestigious, and although I'd played the Glenfarg club many years ago, I'd never done the festival. So when I was asked, I decided it was too good a chance to miss and accepted.



A recurring theme throughout my day at this festival was the importance of song—and not just on stage. The singaround, open to all and well attended, showed the knowledge and commitment of everyone involved. Afterwards, I was to judge the festival's comic songwriting competition. In one of my previous incarnations, as *Head of Scottish Music* at the *Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama*, adjudication was one of my main jobs—I presided over many rounds of exams—but

I have to say that few judging tasks were as much fun as that Sunday afternoon in the Bridge of Earn Institute Hall. First of all, the standard was very high, with the comedy

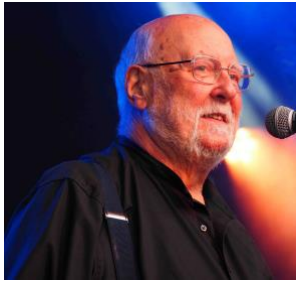


brief stretched to include many different kinds of humour, from total absurdity to acute social observation, through political satire and a personal reminiscence song which came straight out of the great bothy tradition. The audience was great—in full voice for all the choruses and giving generous encouragement to every entrant.

And the most impressive thing about the whole experience? It was the fact that, although serious work had gone into the songs, the event wasn't being taken too seriously. It was more important to take part, either as a listener or a contestant, than it was to win anything. A community had come together for a wonderful, raucous and reflective afternoon's entertainment. It was like the very best of old times.



My evening performance was preceded by an excellent set from [Jim and Susie Malcolm](#), sensitive and spirited by turns, and presented to the audience with humour and understanding. I've known Jim as a fine singer for many years, but I hadn't realised just how much his harmonica playing had developed—melodic, wildly inventive and truly magnificent! After them came [Wayward Jane](#), American folk and Old Time exponents. Fine harmonies, and people loved their energy, particularly the clogging.



And when I took to the stage, I was delighted to find the audience singing along from the very start. It was, to say the least, both touching and gratifying. I was particularly moved by the way they took up the choruses of *The Rock And The Tide* and [Prince Of Darkness](#), and their participation in [Hamish Henderson's](#) classic [Freedom Come All Ye](#)—I don't think there was a single person who didn't sing it from start to finish. The memory of that stayed with me through all the long miles which followed, back down to Kent to rejoin the *Feast of Fiddles* tour.

Looking ahead, my next outing will be the [Rothbury Traditional Music Festival](#), on Saturday, July 12 and if you're from that neck of the woods or feel like a day out in Northumberland, it would be great to see you there. This is my first time at this festival and I'm looking forward to it.

But not all memorable music happens on stage. I have just enjoyed a wonderful weekend of celebrations with dear friends who've made a huge contribution to traditional music. John and Jane Spree ran the [Jolly Porter Folk Club](#) in Exeter, where I had the pleasure of performing often with [The Battlefield Band](#). They've just celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, and of course music played a large part in the proceedings. It was made even more special for me because I caught up with old friends Barry Lister and [Martyn Wyndham-Read](#). It was Martyn who gave me the definitive version of [The Ryebuck Shearer](#), the Australian song which was a staple of the Battlefield Band's early repertoire, and which appeared on our first album—with a misspelled title—way back in 1976.





But to return to the Glenfarg experience... In addition to being wonderful and rewarding, it finally crystallised something which has been on my horizon for a while now, something I knew I was going to find very hard to confront. My workload and priorities—writing fiction, recording, composing, touring solo, touring with *Feast of Fiddles*, teaching—were going to have to change.

When you reach the point where you can't take up fresh challenges due to the pressure of the ones you're already dealing with, serious evaluation has to come into play. For me, there are some big new directions I want to explore and other things which I know I could do a great deal better if I gave them more time. The upshot is that something has to give—and in my case, I've decided, regretfully, that it has to be the band.



So, Brian McNeill has done his last tour with *Feast of Fiddles*. For my live performing fix, I'm going back to my first love—as a soloist, playing traditional music as well as my own compositions.

I've loved my time in this band, and I regard everyone in it, as well as all our crew and helpers, as a personal friend. I'd like to thank them all for three decades of great music, great companionship, and wonderful times, and wherever the music takes them from now on, I wish them all the success in the world.

My thanks to the photographers who've added so much to these pages, Neil King of [Fatea](#) and Jacqueline France—and please remember that this newsletter is never sent without permission. If you decide you don't want it any more, please let me know. And if you know anyone who might like to know what I'm up to, please ask them to email me at the above address.

So, wherever you are, cherish those around you and stay safe—and, as always, I'd really enjoy hearing from you.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Brian", followed by a long horizontal line underneath.