

Music – Live in the living-room! Alan McIntosh visits Edinburgh's most mysterious music venue

Alan McIntosh is one of the editors of [The Broughton Spurtle](#). He came out of his office to go in search of the newest thing on the music scene.

☒ Imagine you had a Friday night free, a visiting friend with a guitar who could sing a bit, and a bottle of plonk in the fridge. A pleasant evening in the living-room would probably ensue. Now, scale everything up by a factor of 74 and you get a very rough idea of the House Concerts that take place twice weekly somewhere in darkest Abbeyhill. Last Friday evening I was invited along – ‘Come early,’ they said, ‘about 6.30pm. That way you’ll get a feel for how it all slots together’. 6.32pm: The door is unlocked.

Inside, a sound-check has already begun. Somebody’s playing Ravi Shankar riffs interspersed with some of the high-speed, most fiddly bits from ‘Duelling Banjos’. This is already unlike any house that I’ve been to before. In 2003, with the help of an architect friend, freelance photographer Douglas Robertson converted a former Cooperative shop into a fabulous, private, lofthouse-style home cum studio. From the shell of the Victorian building he created a modern, split-level, open-plan apartment with an enormous lounge on the ground floor connected by a series of metal gantries to a cavernous basement below. Here are various bedrooms, kitchen, office, and a bath so long you could float a minesweeper in it.

The walls are decorated with 20th-century tinplate advertisements for Will’s Cigarettes and Gold Flake, Castrol Oil and Champion Sparkplugs, Fap’ Anis (celui des connoisseurs), Rajah Cigars and Fry’s Chocolate. The shelves are populated by disembowelled typewriters and old projectors, cine-cameras, glitter balls, sledges, Bakelite telephones and antique

binoculars. By the window, an alarmingly huge and twisted yucca mimes favourite scenes from Richard III.

It's a stylish, spacious and idiosyncratic space into which Robertson has twice a week invited musicians to perform for the last four years.

6.34pm: At the bottom of a vertiginous staircase stands Jane-Ann Purdy, journalist, business guru, website designer and the person who invited me along. Since April she has been handling [social media](#) and marketing for the shows here. Right now she's making Celery and Cashew Nut soup for hungry band members, helpers and assorted strays who drift in and out of the place during the preparations.

☒ I chat to Malcolm, an elderly resident who sleeps under a desk in the office. He sniffs my hand thoughtfully, wondering where he's met me before. His companion arrives and, thankfully, has better powers of recall. We talk about how the House Concerts began.

The building had long been a rehearsal space for bands such as Salsa Celtica and Shooglenifty, but the gigs properly started back in 2007, after Robertson had watched New Orleans blues legend Chris Smither perform at a professional venue in the Old Town. 'He played great guitar, had a great voice, sang great songs,' says Robertson, 'and yet here he was freezing to death in an appalling wee hole on the Cowgate. I just thought I could do things better, and make sure all the money went to the performers.' An old friend and musical collaborator, Dean Owens, was the first booking.

Since then, the House Concerts at No. 42 have hosted a wide ☒ range of bands and individuals, with styles embracing Bluegrass, Swing, Soul, Country and Western, Blues, Folk and increasingly Jazz. The emphasis is, broadly, on Americana, but basically the taste is eclectic. Past acts have included: The Hot Seats, Mike Mara, Pokey LaFarge, Southern Tenant Folk

Union and Martin Kershaw to name but a few.

The occasions are informal, attracting friends, fans and the curious – all of whom generally donate £10 which goes direct and entire to the band. Robertson and Purdy make no money from the events. Alcohol isn't sold or served (although visitors can bring their own). Robertson is blessed with tolerant and/or deaf neighbours and an efficiently sound-proofed property.

'Do you not worry at all about so many strangers coming into your home, twice a week?' I asked him. He looked back at me quizzically, as if the question made no sense.

'Er, no. There's never been a problem. And anyway, I have no sense of privacy.'

7.00pm: The sound-check upstairs is now in full swing. Downstairs, I have completed my examination of a table on which tonight's band – the Bevvie Sisters – display their merchandise: CDs, rings and branded knickers 'perfect for Christmas'. Three of the band are in the kitchen tucking into a Thai take-away. They clearly feel at home. Tonight will be the fourth time they've performed here.

'So how come you keep coming back?' I ask singer Heather Macleod, tactlessly adding 'Is it about the money?'

'That helps, obviously,' she replies, 'but it's more about the place. This is a really special venue.'

'In what way?'

She turns to face me, notices for the first time that I have spilled Celery and Cashew Nut soup all down my front and into my satchel.

'I suppose it's just that it's so ... relaxed.'

Jane-Ann Purdy (House Concerts [blog maestro](#) and friendly soup dragon) has had a difficult course to steer since taking over the marketing last spring. A degree of discretion surrounding the venue's location has been necessary to keep numbers manageable, and to remain below the radar of local bureaucracy. However, a dedicated website, newsletter, [request it here](#), [online diary](#) and mailing list were also required in order to make the venture run smoothly, build a reliable guestlist and keep it informed. People can still just pitch up

on the night, but they can now also [reserve tickets](#) in advance.

However, the intention has never been to professionalise these occasions out of all recognition, to ruin the charm of their amateur origins and personalised setting. It's always been first and foremost about the music, and rewarding the musicians as much as possible. It's a winning formula – the House Concerts are well-established on the Edinburgh scene, with US promoters actively seeking spots for their artists – and one which they'd love to continue in future, but probably can't ...



7.30pm: The sound-check continues, even though audience members have started drifting in and making themselves comfy. Robertson and Purdy are working at top speed. They expect 75 guests, and are now shifting sofas into position, conjuring dozens of folding chairs out of thin air and arranging them in rows. I perch on a stool at the back, trying to pigeon-hole the audience by age and gender, and failing. There is a remarkably mixed demographic, even within the groups of two, three and four who arrive together. A lot of people clearly know each other. Everyone seems to be on first-name terms with the hosts.

The problem is that house concerts on this scale and at this regularity are probably unsustainable. They've had no complaints yet. They've broken no laws. But something will inevitably give eventually. If nothing else, the patience of neighbours must surely, finally wear thin. The challenge, then, is to find an 'equally homely' alternative, a venue which retains the original ethos and quirky charm, but can do so without constantly looking over its shoulder.

Chris Smither, whose travails at the Cowgate partly inspired the whole project, may also be part of the answer. His gigs sold out here for 2 nights in 2009. He'll be back in Spring 2012, but has now such a following that no Abbeyhill living-room could possibly contain them all. Robertson has therefore booked the [Queen's Hall](#) for 11 March instead. This then, or a fairly intimate space like it, may have to be the House Concerts' future.

8.14pm: I've been chatting to the mother and daughter on my left. It turns out they've known one of the Bevy Sisters

vocalists since teenagehood. With 45 seconds to go before kick-off, we discover that they, the band member and I all share old acquaintances in a West Highland hamlet. It's an extraordinary coincidence, but somehow I'm not surprised. Robertson takes to the microphone, introduces the evening with a welcome, a brief explanation, and directions to the loos. The living-room lights go down. The stage lights come up. And the Bevy Sisters begin.

What follow are two 45-minute sets based largely around [the band's latest CD](#) 'The St James Sessions'. Guitar, percussion and double-bass combine with tight vocal harmonies and a choice of original songs and cover versions that range from the lovelorn to the light-hearted, from murderously melancholic to cowgirl romantic. They teeter sometimes at the very brink of kitsch, but by sheer musicality – technique and style effortlessly perfect – do not fall in. It's [a performance](#), of course it is, but as well as that it's an evening among friends. This is a group thing – a two-way exchange of affection, laughter and admiration in an authentically domestic setting. It's amazing, it's like nothing else you've experienced.

11.45pm: Walking home along London Road, I am thinking about all the people we don't realise we already know. I hum 'Cow Cow Ticky Ay Ae' to myself as the snow starts to fall from a sodium-coloured sky. It's proper cold out here, but I'm warm inside.