

Parcel of Rogues gives Pathhead pianist surprise radio hit

Pathhead-based pianist Dave Milligan has scored a surprise success among radio producers and presenters with a social commentary song with a difference.

Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation is a poem written by Robert Burns in 1791 to decry the members of the Parliament of Scotland who signed the Act of Union with England in 1707.

It's been sung by political singers including Ewan MacColl and Dick Gaughan and recorded by folk groups such as Steeleye Span, the Dubliners and more recently Old Blind Dogs, and has come to encompass politicians who are viewed as corrupt or less than honest.

Milligan wasn't interested in the words so much as the melody that has been sung with them for over two hundred years when he recorded his version, Parcel of Rogues, with two Italian musicians in Udine, in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of northern Italy. It was one of two folk songs – the other being Hamish Henderson's Freedom Come All Ye – that he wanted to try out with bassist Danilo Gallo and drummer U.T. Gandhi.

The track that resulted is one of seven tunes on Milligan's new album, Momento, and it jumped out at Seonaid Aitken, who presents BBC Radio Scotland's Jazz Nights on Sunday evenings. Aitken played Parcel of Rogues on the show and enthused about its funkiness, and presenters across the UK have followed suit.

"I've no idea if the radio people have chosen to play Parcel of Rogues for political reasons," says Milligan, who works in both folk music – with the international fiddle band String

Sisters and his partner, singer-harpist Corrina Hewat – and jazz, with trumpeter Colin Steele. “Naturally, the recording doesn’t reveal the words but the sentiment behind it feels strangely relevant in today’s world. I really just liked the groove that Danilo and U.T. created when I played them the tune.”

Momento has taken five years to see the light of day. In 2015, with a bursary for to help his personal development from Creative Scotland, Milligan booked two days in the ArteSuono recording studio in Udine and invited Gallo and Gandhi to join him.

“I’d met the guys the previous year when we worked together on an international collaboration with Colin Steele and the Italian saxophonist Enzo Favata at Edinburgh Jazz Festival,” says Milligan, who more recently acted as musical supervisor with Mark Knopfler for the stage musical Local hero. “At that time I was struck by the energy and understanding we created as a rhythm section and when I was given the bursary I really just wanted to play with them some more.”

Gallo and Gandhi had talked about ArteSuono and enthused about the piano the studio owned and the engineer, Stefano Amerio, who worked there. Amerio has been involved in over forty recordings for the leading jazz label ECM Records and knowing ECM’s reputation for high-end sound quality, Milligan was intrigued.

“Before we started playing in the studio,” says Milligan, “I told Danilo and U.T. that if we didn’t even record one complete track, that was fine. This was really just an experiment. It was about me letting go and being in the moment.”

The sessions in fact produced twenty finished tracks and when Milligan listened to them again a few weeks ago, he chose seven of them to release as Momento with the possibility of another one, maybe two albums to follow.

“The abrupt stop in playing live and meeting other musicians that the Covid-19 pandemic brought gave me time to think about

my own music for the first time in quite a while," he says. "I'd been thinking it was ten years since my previous album, Shops, came out until someone pointed out that it was released in 2008. So, I thought, I really need to put something out and I'm really happy with the way Momento has turned out."