

Barbara Dickson on Sandy Bell's – “it was not a music pub in my day”

It's the world famous Edinburgh pub where Barbara Dickson and musicians such as Sir Billy Connolly and fiddle ace Aly Bain are often said to have begun their careers.

Now Ms Dickson says it was not a music pub in her day – and she gets “very upset” when she hears dodgy fiddle players in Sandy Bell's “making a racket” and feels like telling them to “shut up”.

The Dunfermline-born singer, 77, learned to sing and play guitar on the folk music scene before becoming a household name with hits like “January February”, “Caravan Song” and her record-breaking duet with Elaine Paige, “I Know him So Well”.

But she insisted budding musicians in her day would not have presumed to take their instruments out and start performing in a pub, and that what happened in Sandy Bell's had been mythologised over the years.

She told the A Kick Up The Arts podcast: “It is architecturally almost identical to how it was in 1964 but there are people playing music up the back with instruments – that never happened in Sandy Bell's.

“Everybody has a completely wrong idea of what Sandy Bell's was. It was not a music pub.

“The first archway, forward of that to the door was all regulars, like crusty old guys with flat caps on with their pints of light, probably in those days. They had nothing whatsoever to do with the arty-farty crowd at the back.

“We would meet at the back, by the ladies’ loo door, there could be 20 of us. We would be Edinburgh people and also people coming through like Billy Connolly, Gerry Rafferty, Tam Harvey and people from Glasgow, and we’d all just stand with our pints at the back.

“Nobody took out instruments and eventually somebody – usually someone like the late Derek Moffat, who was a wonderful member of The McCalmans – would burst into song a capella and we would all join in. That was Sandy Bell’s to me.

“We did that all over the place. You didn’t presume to take a guitar out of a case, it was like taking the mickey.

“This is why I get very upset when I hear rather lamentable fiddle playing in Sandy Bell’s. I feel like going up and saying ‘excuse me, do you think you could just shut up, because that’s horrible, that racket you’re making. You need to go and listen to Aly Bain, and then come back’.”

Dickson, who lives in Edinburgh, added: “Also, we were quite, I wouldn’t say shy and if I say well behaved that sounds prissy, but we wouldn’t presume to take over the back of a pub. Nobody did, unless you were invited to play and that was a different matter.

“The Waverley Bar, upstairs, they had a room where you could play and one or two other places, but you wouldn’t just go into a pub and get your fiddle out and start playing because people would say ‘do you mind being quiet’.”

Sandy Bell’s now hosts live music nightly and is a pilgrimage for those with an interest in folk music and the array of musicians who played there.

Sandy Bell's

According to the Scotland's Pubs and Bars website, Sandy Bell's was "a melting pot of writers, poets, artists, singers and musicians" before it evolved into a folk/blues music venue where musicians and singers were encouraged to perform".

"Budding musicians such as Ally [sic] Bain, Barbara Dickson and Dick Gaughan cut their teeth in the Bells as did Billy Connolly, The Dubliners and many many more."

Dickson is now one of Scotland's best-selling female singers as well as the winner of two Olivier awards for her leading roles on the West End stage.

But she said that when she started singing in pubs and folk clubs in the sixties, the only Scots woman who was internationally famous was the late Jean Redpath, who left for America aged 24.

She said: "There were very few women. They would get up and sing at the folk club but they didn't get through. It's extraordinary. If people from that time did become successful, it really is a combination of luck and steely determination – maybe not ambition as such but the inability to turn off, 'I will not go away'.

"It's not that "I will be here, I'm just not going to go away'."

Dickson also told podcast host Nicola Meighan she has never considered herself "a star".

She added: "I remember, nobody I worked with in music then wanted to become a 'star'. Even when people called me a star, when I was a popstar, I would burst out laughing and I would say 'I'm not a star'. That applies to someone else, it's all to do with celebrity.

“We just wanted to learn songs and sing songs and share songs and that was the thing. It was like soaking it up like a sponge.”



Barbara Dickson, OBE, PHOTO Brian Aris