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# Dirty Liner

*Folk & World Music*

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## BATTLEFIELD BAND

**Kelly Willis**  
*Newfound Confidence*

**Dave Alvin**  
*American Music*

**April Verch**  
*Fiddle Fusion*



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It's just a little bit the way it is.



Battlefield Band, 1977 - (L-R) Brian McNeill, Alan Reid, John Gahagan, and Jamie McMenamy



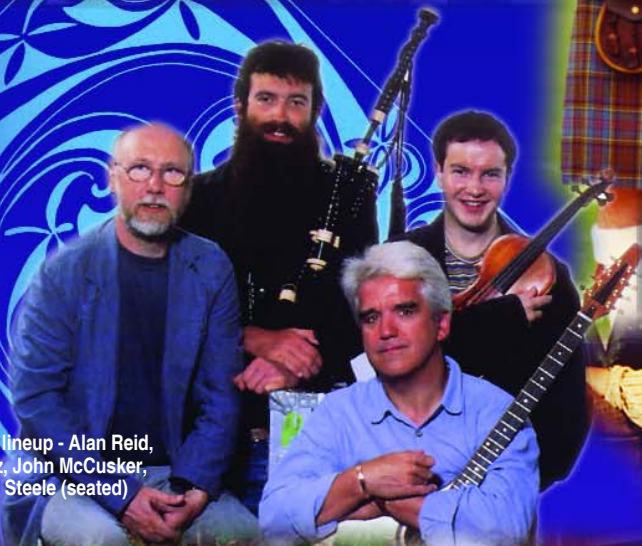
Dougie Pincock and Alistair Russell, late 80s



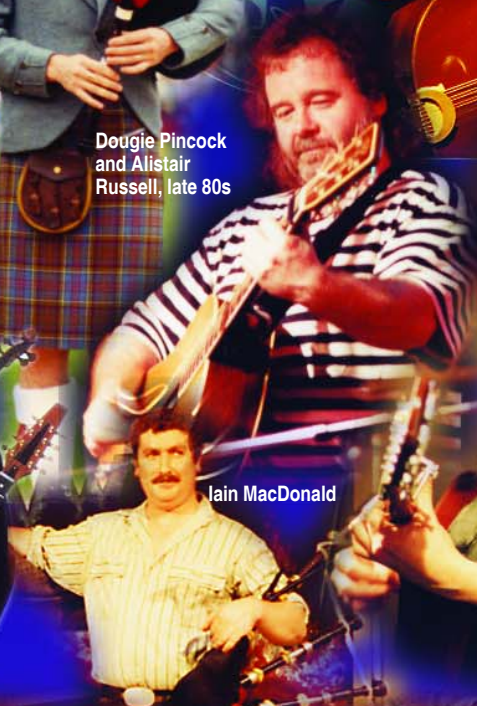
John McCusker



The 1998 lineup - Alan Reid, Mike Katz, John McCusker, and Davy Steele (seated)



Iain MacDonald



Karine Polwart



The Battlefield Band, 2002 - (left to right) Alasdair White, Alan Reid, Mike Katz, and Pat Kilbride

photos: BB1977: Temple Records; Pincock, Russell: Gloria M. Ross; McCusker, Polwart: David M. Schofield; MacDonald: Nancy Baldaut; BB 2002: Gary Glade



The last time *Dirty Linen* published a feature on Scottish folk group the Battlefield Band was issue #36, way back in 1991. At that time, the big story was the departure of singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist Brian McNeill and piper Dougie Pincock, and their replacement by a teenage whiz kid named John McCusker and a lovable curmudgeon named Iain MacDonald.

A lot has changed since then. Already known in the early nineties for a history of many lineup changes involving such names as Jamie McMenamy (Kornog), Ged Foley (The House Band) and Jim and Sylvia Barnes (Kentigern), Battlefield has lost and gained members at an equally brisk pace since then. Consider this: After their 1991 lineup change, the only original member of Battlefield left was singer/songwriter/keyboardist Alan Reid. Today, the only remaining member of the 1991 lineup is... singer/songwriter/keyboardist Alan Reid. McCusker, MacDonald and singer/guitarist Alistair Russell have all left the band, as have singer/guitarists Davy Steele and Karine Polwart, who had joined up since those days. They've been replaced by fiddler Alasdair White, piper Mike Katz, and singer/guitarist/bouzouki player Pat Kilbride. I caught up with Reid, White, Katz, and Kilbride after a concert at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in July 2002.

Reid set the stage, describing the band's prehistory. The Battlefield Band, he said, had its roots in a group that McNeill founded with Jimmy Thomson and Sandra Laing in 1969. "They were all at the same university together," he remembered, "and that's where I met them." The trio had a Friday residency at a Glasgow pub called the Iron Horse. One day, fate opened the door for Reid to join. Typically, Reid explained, the members would bring their instruments to the university with them and lock them up in a little room until it was time for their gig. "On this particular day," he remembered, "they were a bit slow in getting to the room, and when they got there it was locked, and the guy that had the key had gone home. So they had to go down to this bar and say, 'We're very sorry but we can't do the gig tonight, we don't have our instruments.' The guy that owned the place wasn't impressed at



all, so he said, 'You're fired!' And that was the end of that lineup. I joined the band from then."

The new group was called Harvest, and eventually had its name changed to the Battlefield Band. "We rehearsed once a week for about a year before we actually got a gig," Reid recounted. "And we got a gig in a football club. We played to — I would say it was at least seven people! This was the kind of place where they wanted country music, so four hairy guys dressed in t-shirts and jeans playing this weird half-Irish stuff was not their cup of tea."

The reaction of early audiences like this had a formative effect on the group. "In our first couple of years, the only gigs that we could get were in bars," Reid recounted. "The audiences were very tough, and we found that the only way to grab their attention was not only by playing music, but by telling jokes. So we got into a way of talking to the audience and trying to get their attention. That kind of talking, involving the audience, was established in the very early part of our career, and I think it's been a hallmark of our group."

The band didn't do a Scottish folk repertoire until a few years after its founding. "We played acoustic music, so we'd do any music that we liked, from anywhere," Reid said. The whole

idea of a Scottish folk band was a novelty at the time, he explained. While there were vocal groups like the Corries, adapting the Clancy Brothers' sound to Scottish songs, there were very few bands doing instrumental music. It wasn't until their early experiences on the road, when English audiences expected a Scottish band to play Scottish music, that McNeill, Reid, and friends began to focus. Taking inspiration from the 1970s experiments of Planxty and the Bothy Band in Irish music, they set out to do similar arrangements of Scottish music.

About that time, Battlefield started recording. With a vengeance. "We went recording crazy," Reid admitted. "We did four albums in 23 months, with no repeats. It was like 50 tracks." Their first album, for the Breton label Arfolk, was as a trio made up of McNeill, Reid, and string player Ricky Starr. Titled *Scottish Folk* (and re-titled for CD release as *Farewell to Nova Scotia*), it came out in 1976. Most of the music was Scottish, but there were still Irish, Canadian, English, and Australian influences. Starr was soon replaced by singer/bouzouki player Jamie McMenamy and whistle player John Gahagan, making Battlefield a quartet.

Their discography gets murky at this point, and most publications get this next bit wrong. Their two followup albums featured the same lineup and had the same title on the front cover (simply *The Battlefield Band*), but were released on different labels, in different countries, and with no material in common. The first of these was their famous 1977 "white album" for Topic, and hence their U.K. debut. The other, which was subtitled "Wae's Me for Prince Charlie," was their second on a Breton Label (this time Escalibur), and was released later in 1977. At this time, Reid said, they were taking themselves very seriously as artists "rather than happy-go-lucky folkies," and their albums reflect that. Slightly studious, the "white album" was justly esteemed by Topic, then Britain's most serious folk label. It's held up remarkably well, too, and is still a fresh and interesting listen today.

But it was that second Breton release that pointed the way to Battlefield's future. As a nod to Scotland's favorite instrument, the members

# BATTLING ON ANOTHER DECADE WITH THE BATTLEFIELD BAND

BY STEVE WINICK



Gloria M. Ross

**Founding member Brian McNeill, 1991**

asked three different pipers, who played three different kinds of bagpipes, to join them. In so doing, they became one of the first formations ever to mix an acoustic folk band with Highland bagpipes; Alba was performing the same experiment at around the same time, and the Tannahill Weavers would soon make the pipes integral to their act. Though it would take a couple more years, the pipes would become a mainstay of the Battlefield Band's sound, as well. Sadly, this album, despite its excellent material and its historical importance, is the only Battlefield Band album never reissued on CD.

Throughout the late 1970s, the band was making quite a reputation in folk clubs all over Britain. "England was pretty wide open," Reid recalled, "because Scottish groups like ourselves were pretty much a novelty, and there was no equivalent in England."

Kilbride remembers his sister enthusing about the Battlefield Band in 1976 or 1977. Soon, as the bookings manager for his university's folk club in Bolton, he booked the band — at that time still a quartet featuring Reid, McNeill, Gahagan, and McMenamy. But the band that arrived was short a member; Gahagan had just quit to pursue a career in graphic arts. So on the spur of the moment, Kilbride jumped in the van and went off on tour as the band's first and only Irish member. "It was a gas!" he enthused. "We were very young. I'd just grown my first beard." Restless always, Kilbride lasted with the band only a year. During that time, he participated in Battlefield's fourth album, *At the Front*. It was issued in early 1978, less than two years after its first had come out. A classic offering, this album featured McMenamy's renderings of the big ballad "Lang Johnny Moir" and the broadside "Tae the Begg'ins," Kilbride's earthy singing of "The Bachelor" and "The Lady Leroy," and the band's epic take on the border ballad "The Battle of Harlaw," as well as many stirring sets of tunes.

Kilbride's departure precipitated a rapid-fire series of lineup changes that stabilized in the quartet of McNeill, Reid, Foley, and piper Duncan MacGillivray. During these changes, the Battlefield Band developed musically in several new directions. First, they incorporated new instruments, most notably the Highland bagpipes and the keyboards. The pipes were the fruition of the ideas started on their second Breton album. Battlefield's first two pipers, MacGillivray and Dougie Pincock, were early pioneers in using the pipes in a folk band context, providing lowland and border pipes for song accompaniments and Highland pipes for rousing marches and dance tunes. Combined with the fiddle, guitar, and keyboards, they were a forceful sound indeed. Foley brought his Northumbrian smallpipes to the group, another variation on the piping



Gloria M. Ross

**Future bandmates Davy Steele and John McCusker, 1991**

theme, but it is the Highland bagpipe that will forever define the Battlefield sound. "The Warpipes," Kilbride commented. "It's a pretty strong corporate identity, isn't it?"

The keyboards, too, were a new idea, and Reid reckoned they were the first Scottish folk group with a full-time keyboard player. Their first was an American-made pedal organ that the band members found in a junk shop in Glasgow. After they went through that and several other instruments, they decided something had to change. "It came to a point where the pedal organs were just falling to bits," Reid explained, "because they couldn't stand the rigors of four guys throwing them in the back of a van in various states of inebriation." Luckily, at about that time synthesizers became affordable; Reid has bantered with the audience from behind a synthesizer rack ever since.

A third development was the shift from traditional music to compositions and songs written by band members. McNeill, a writer and composer as well as a staggeringly good multi-instrumentalist, got the ball rolling. "Brian started writing songs first," Reid said, "and in fact it was his example that prompted me to

write songs. I hadn't thought about it before, but when I saw that he was writing songs, I thought, 'Well, maybe I can do this, as well.' " By the mid 1980s, the band's repertoire contained a wealth of newly composed songs by both McNeill and Reid, and classics like "The Lads O' the Fair," "The Rovin' Dies Hard," "Island Earth No More," and "The Snows of France and Holland" became a trademark of the group.

The 1980s passed as the band members cemented their signature sound and honed their songwriting skills. Though MacGillivray was replaced by Pincock and Foley by Russell, the band's music was remarkably consistent. McNeill was both the primary instrumentalist and the primary songwriter, and many began to think of it as his band. "Brian is a very big personality," Reid explained. "He's a large guy physically, so he's always been hard to ignore on a stage. He's got a big presence." By contrast, Reid stays off to one side. "I was always quite content to not be quite center stage, but a little to the side of it," he agreed. "I've been quite happy playing second string to other front guys."

In fact, Reid fooled the world with his second-string act. When McNeill and Pincock announced their plans to leave in 1990, many expected the band would die, underestimating both Reid's commitment and his talent. Battlefield hadn't changed lineups for seven years. The members were thoroughly comfortable with the material, and indeed with each other. It could have been demoralizing for Reid and Russell to start all over. Instead, they used the departures as an opportunity to remake the band. "We plucked out of nowhere a very young guy that no one had heard of, plus a well-respected piper from a piping family," Reid remembered. In so doing, they changed the band's direction, eliminating the flaccid rock 'n' roll covers like "Bad Moon Rising" (which Reid called "a millstone around our necks") and the novelty songs like "After



Gloria M. Ross

**Iain McDonald, 1997**





Gary Glade

Hours.” “We had become almost a parody of ourselves,” Reid admitted. “Once we’d started to do novelty numbers, then we had to top it, and do things even more outrageous. It was a case of ever-diminishing returns, like *Police Academy VI* or something. So when those two guys left, it was a perfect opportunity for us to say, ‘What are the strengths of this band?’ and ‘What are we about?’ ”

Since the turn of the 1990s, Reid explained, “the band doesn’t revisit old numbers very much.” Instead, the members tend to write new songs and tunes and arrange traditional material that the band has never done before. This worked well with the new members’ personalities. MacDonald, as a piper with a thoroughly traditional background and experience with the group Ossian, was ready to make Battlefield more folkie, and was in Reid’s words “intensely irritated” by having to play “Bad Moon Rising” on the bagpipes during his earliest days with the group. McCusker, who had come to the band straight from school via a high school group called Parcel O’ Rogues, was game for anything.

“Like a lot of our lineups,” Reid said, “it was a pretty odd assortment of individuals. There’s myself, however you want to describe me. Alistair, a little rotund English guy with a Scottish background, who was pretty much interested in Irish music. Then you had John, a young kid from the center of Scotland who was very much influenced by Irish music, and Iain, who was steeped in Highland Gaelic tradition. So in a sense it was pretty unlikely.” But the chemistry was there, and the new lineup was a success — indeed, it achieved the same level of stability as the previous band, and continued to tour and record for almost seven years. The group developed a definite personality in that time, with McCusker’s youthful playfulness and MacDonald’s gruff and deadpan approach balancing one another to perfection. In tours around the world, and on four acclaimed albums, this quartet earned the respect of longtime Battlefield fans.

Like any lineup, though, this one would not last forever. In 1997, MacDonald called it quits and was replaced by the band’s current piper, Mike Katz, who came to the band from the well-known group Ceolbeg. With his long beard and his Jewish name, Katz seems more like a rabbi than a piper. Indeed, the bagpipes were not at all a foregone conclusion given his family’s background. “I’m not at all Scottish,” he explained — though he said it with a lowland burr so thick you could cut it with a Claymore. “My family are from Cleveland, Ohio, and before that from Eastern Europe, and they’re Jews.”

So how did a nice Jewish boy end up talking like Billy Connolly and playing bagpipes in Scotland’s foremost folk band? He began studying the Highland pipes in Los Angeles at the age of 10. The pipes introduced him to the rest of the culture; he first visited Scotland as a member of a pipe band. He was so taken with the country he decided to go there for university, and picked Edinburgh not only for the excellent education but for the nightlife. “It’s beautiful!” he enthused. “It’s a lot of fun, a lot of drinking and dancing, and people have a good time. But it’s very compact, and everybody knows everybody. So it’s like an old version of New York.”

By Katz’s own admission, his attempt at a university education didn’t amount to very much. “I got a degree,” he said dismissively, “but hopefully I’ll never use it.” However, living in Edinburgh was a life-changing experience. Among other things, it plugged him into a network of musicians. In the mid 1990s, one of Katz’s piping friends suggested him for Ceolbeg, which also featured the great singer Davy Steele. While playing for Ceolbeg, Katz befriended McCusker, and when MacDonald left, McCusker suggested Katz as a replacement.

Katz reckons that his main qualification for being in the band wasn’t being a good piper; they’re common enough in Scotland. It was his ability to tour so often and so widely. “A lot of people don’t want to go on the road,” he



Alan Reid

Gloria M. Rosson

## BATTLEFIELD BAND *Time & Tide*

Temple COMD2090 (2002)

## ALAN REID & ROB VAN SANTE *Under the Blue*

Red Sands RSC001 (2002)

After all these years, and all these albums, a Battlefield Band fan knows exactly what to expect from a new recording. There are a couple of fast bagpipe/fiddle duet tunes, a few slower, melodic pieces, two or three songs from Alan Reid, and a couple from whoever is the featured vocalist/guitarist. In that respect *Time & Tide* won’t disappoint, as it contains all this and more. The new member this time around is Pat Kilbride, making his second appearance with the band, replacing Karine Polwart. His song “Camden Town” will become the new singalong in the live set, and his guitar/bouzouki playing fits in perfectly with the fiddle and bagpipes. Alan Reid is Alan Reid, the one constant in the band’s history, singing one original and two traditional songs in his trademark dry, gravelly voice. Fiddler Alasdair White has done what most people considered impossible — made people forget about John McCusker — as his fiddle, whistle, and composition skills continue to improve and impress, and Mike Katz quietly and efficiently fills the bagpipe/multi-instrumentalist position. It’s probably far too late in the band’s career to expect the members to mess with the formula that’s made them successful, and *Time & Tide* shows that they can still make entertaining music doing what they’ve always done. This should please the group’s fans, and could win them many new converts.

As if he’s not busy enough with Battlefield, Alan Reid has teamed up with the group’s soundman, Rob van Sante, on a surprisingly strong duo recording called *Under the Blue*. Van Sante is a good guitarist and has a nice voice, and he helps put Reid’s songs in a very un-Battlefield context. Reid’s voice has limited range, but the fuller arrangements tend to compensate for that, and with only one or two new songs per Battlefield recording, Reid has a backlog of good songs for this collection. Not at all like his full-time gig and better for it.

— Jim Lee (Simi Valley, CA)

explained. "There aren't that many bands that tour as much as we do." How is the touring life? It's intense. "You have to live with a bunch of people," he said. "All the time. For six months of the year. It's maybe 20 hours a day, for five weeks at a stretch. It makes you kind of weird, because when you go off the road you're not living with these guys, and no one understands what you're talking about. And I like that!"

Soon after Katz joined, Russell left the fold, leaving a vacancy for a singer and guitarist. Katz's Ceolbeg bandmate, Davy Steele, stepped into the breach. A singer with a warm, rough voice and a songwriter with a beautiful ear for both music and language, Steele fit right in. His songs became a big part of the band's repertoire, and the fans loved his singing and his sense of humor. Although Steele had been prominent on the folk scene since the 1980s in bands like Drinker's Drouth, Ceolbeg, and Clan Alba, Battlefield was his step to full-time writing and performing. He was living his dream.

"He made a big impression on audiences," Reid remembered. "Audiences loved him, because here was a guy who was 50, all of a sudden he was a full-time musician, and it was a very fulfilling thing for him. So he loved every single minute of it. He grasped it with both hands, and audiences I think recognized that in him."



The current lineup lines up

This makes it all the more tragic that Steele had to leave the band after a little more than two years. One day at the beginning of band practice, he began to feel ill. "We thought he was joking, because he was such a prankster," Reid remembered. "But he wasn't." A diagnosis of cancer, and the necessity of immediate treatment, took him away from the group very suddenly. While Steele battled for his life, the Battlefield Band soldiered on, with guests like Malcolm Stitt and Kilbride filling in for their housebound colleague. When it seemed likely that Steele would be waylaid for a long time, the band reluctantly replaced him, with Karine Polwart of the group Malinky. A short time later, Steele died, having left an indelible

impression on Battlefield's many fans through his concert performances and his appearances on two albums. "He was a great loss," Reid lamented. "That's all you need to say."

Like the other women who have graced the Battlefield Band, Polwart seemed more of a fleeting presence in the group. Although young and relatively new to folk music, she was clearly a rising star in Scottish folk-song circles, having won many awards for both traditional singing and songwriting between 1998 and 2000. Polwart toured with the Battlefield Band for close to two years and contributed several beautiful songs and

solid guitar playing to their album *Happy Daze*. As a specialist in traditional song, she brought that side of the band's identity back to the fore. But soon she decided that Battlefield's grueling tour schedule was just too much, and Battlefield was left in need of a singer/guitarist once again.

This time, they tapped Kilbride. Needless to say, he was vastly more experienced than he was during his first stint with the group. After leaving Battlefield in 1979, Kilbride moved to France, then lived for years in Belgium, where he played jazz, rock, and folk. In the 1980s and 1990s, he settled for over 10 years in New York, where he rebuilt his reputation in traditional music, played many solo shows, and

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# Battlefield Band

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fronted the Kips Bay Ceili Band with John Whelan. A subsequent move took him to London, where he lived up the Irish music scene in Camden Town. Though he played with many great musicians there, and set up a recording studio to produce his own and other people's albums, he began to get the itch to join a band. Kilbride had already filled in for Steele briefly before Polwart joined. This time they decided to make it permanent, and Kilbride joined in 2002.

The switch from Polwart to Kilbride was preceded by another momentous change when John McCusker made up his mind to leave. McCusker, who had been with the band since he was practically a child, had a very adult decision to make: Either remain on the road with the band, or marry his sweetheart, English folksinger Kate Rusby. He made the only sensible choice: kiss his bandmates goodbye, and kiss Rusby at the altar. He now produces records when not on tour as a member of Rusby's band.

The replacement that the Battlefield Band found, Alasdair White, has much in common with the McCusker of 1990. He's a teenager fresh from school, a fiery fiddle player, and a multi-instrumentalist. As a piper, White introduced pipe duets into the band for the first time. How did they come across White? Battlefield's long-time manager Robin Morton, who also runs Temple Records, had worked with the young player before. Indeed, White had tried to get a recording contract with a young band from his native island of Lewis. "Robin wasn't interested in taking the band on, but he was interested in myself and the keyboard player," White

said. "So he got us down to the mainland, and he asked if I wanted to do any accompaniments on Christine Primrose's album. And I think it was at my second session for that record that Robin sat me down and scuppered my chances of going to university."

It was a hard decision for White: university or a musical career. But it certainly seemed natural to those who knew him. "Later that night," he remembered, "I saw Noel Hill, the concertina player, at the Waverly Folk Club in Edinburgh, and [well-known Scottish multi-instrumentalist] Norman Chalmers was there. And he turned to Robin and said, 'When are you going to get this young boy to join the Batties?' And we looked at each other and gasped. He'd sussed it!"

White soon decided to join. "I was planning to do music for a living anyway, after university," he explained. "I was going to have a stab at it, anyway. People go to university to get their ideal job, and I've got mine at the moment."

What effect does a lineup change have on the Battlefield Band? By all accounts, it's healthy but sometimes uncomfortable. Katz explained, "Every time you have a change, hopefully it brings something fresh. The way that I play is largely influenced by playing with John McCusker all the time, so it's great to have Alasdair play a different kind of style. And likewise, playing with Pat is completely different than playing with Karine or with Davy. So from a musical point of view it is fresh, it's different, and it keeps you on your toes." On the other hand, as Reid pointed out, there's a whole learning process that must be restarted every time new members join. "You do get

a lot of energy," he said. "But at the same time, it's a lot of hard work."

The work is paying off. On the evidence of its short concert at the Museum, as well as its CD *Time and Tide*, the band is back with a new sound: more guitar-driven, more Irish-influenced, and perhaps a bit lighter than during the McCusker years. Indeed, Reid's daughter had a comment on the new album that he laughingly repeated: "I like it! It's more Irish than the other ones!" This all makes sense given the new members. Kilbride is a more serious guitarist than Russell, Polwart, or Steele; his latest solo CD, *Nightingale Lane*, is about half solo guitar pieces, something none of the others would be likely to try. Kilbride is also Irish, which introduced new elements to the band. "I'm not a Scottish musician. It's a struggle for me," he admitted, "to know how to accompany and how to fit in, but I think we're coming to a compromise. We worked harder in the studio, and we thought about it, and listened a lot, and we try and get to the essence of the music."

It helps that White comes from the western isles of Scotland, where the culture has much in common with Gaelic Ireland. "There's more resemblance to Irish music in the indigenous music of Lewis," White explained. "It bears far more resemblance to Irish music than the music of east coast Scotland, which is another matter entirely." This means that White served almost as a bridge between the Scottish and Irish elements of the new band.

In any case, the ethnic makeup of the music doesn't matter to the members in the slightest. Despite the group's motto, "Forward with Scotland's Past," they have had non-Scottish musicians in the band constantly since

Kilbride first joined in 1978; Foley and Russell are both English, and Katz is American. "Irish and Scottish music are the same music," Reid explained. "It's the same form of music. I like to use the analogy of it being the same language but a different accent. Unlike, say, Welsh music or Breton music, which to my ears sound quite different from Irish or Scottish music."

Still, the group members all hope their fans will embrace the new sound. "How people react to the band with our Irish part of the potion, that remains to be seen," Reid said. What's their next step? "Playing a million gigs!" Kilbride answered. Reid had a different answer: "Immediately, it's seeing what the response to this album is. We've done it very quickly, but I think there's a lot of energy in it. We're playing a lot of the repertoire off the album, which we all had to learn after we'd recorded it...a lot of the arrangements have changed. But what's going to be *really* interesting is when we start getting to the next load of new stuff," he said with a gleam in his eye.

That excitement of getting to the next song, the next arrangement, the next gig, the next record, is always driving the Battlefield Band. You can tell, talking to the members, that this is what they want to be doing. Although they all have side projects, most notably Kilbride's new solo disc and Reid's duo album with Battlefield Band sound engineer Rob van Sante, they always come back to the band with excitement and enthusiasm. When the band's young fiddler expressed that ebullience, Reid was quick to respond. "That's the danger, Alasdair," he quipped. "Once you've done this, you can never go work in a bank."



Alan Reid



Pat Kilbride



Mike Katz



Alasdair White