



Nothing is explained

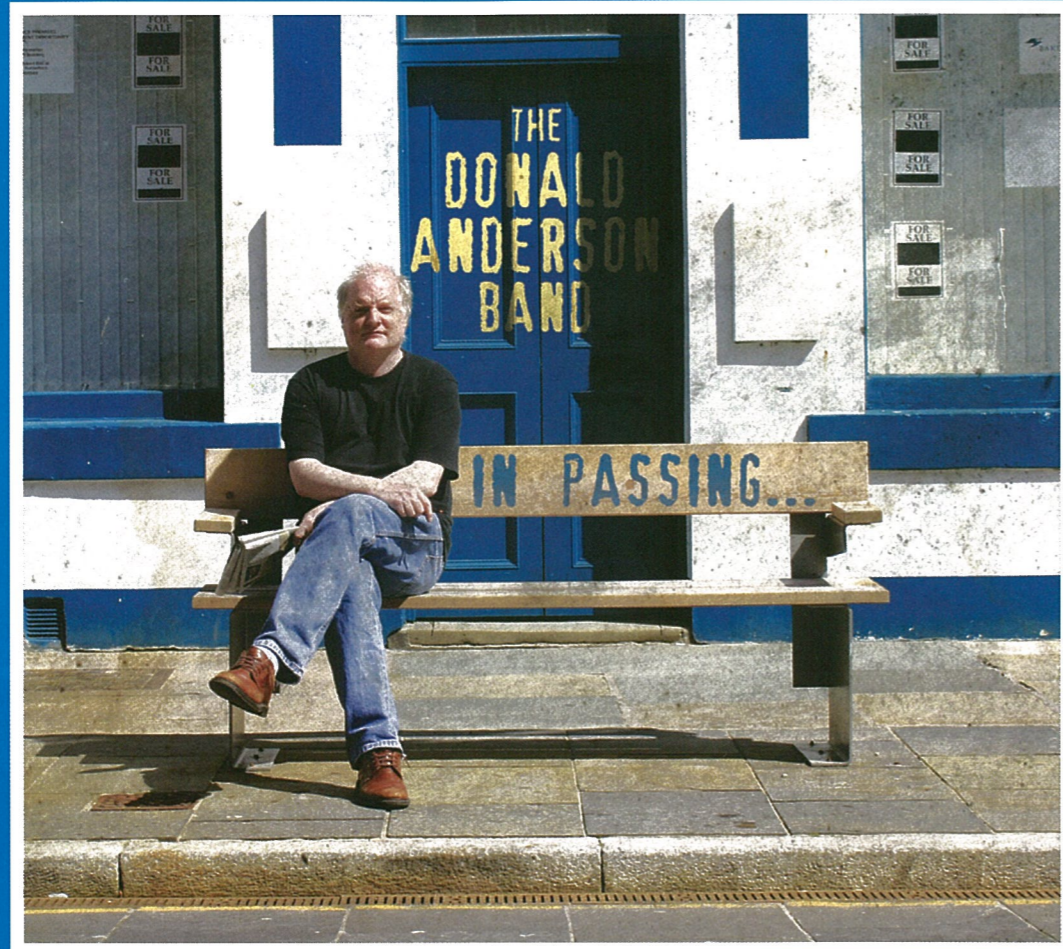
Malachy Tallack meets singer-songwriter Donald Anderson to discuss his new album, *In Passing*.

It is difficult to know how to introduce *In Passing*. Is this Donald Anderson's second album? Or the debut from The Donald Anderson Band? The CD cover at least suggests the latter, and fans of the songwriter's solo record *Waterhead Sky* (2005) will find the musical distance that lies between these two excellent pieces of work impossible to ignore.

From the ringing harmonics that launch the album to the electric guitar solo that closes it, there is no doubt that this is something different. It is a big sound, with two guitars – Anderson and Alan McKay – plus bass from (Councillor) Rick Nickerson and drums by Duncan Kidson. A burst of harmonica punctuates the songs here and there, and Erin Sandison adds backing vocals to several of the tracks, lifting and highlighting some of the most engaging chorus melodies (of which there are several). This is a musically rich album, and it is best played loud.

According to Donald, *In Passing* should certainly not be considered his work alone. "The album is the product of the collaboration – what happens when we all play together", he says.

"The thing about this CD is that it involves a lot more people, which has been really good. If it's not actually an enjoyable process from which you learn a lot and get a lot then there isn't much point in doing it. And it *has* been a really enjoyable process; and



it's been an enjoyable process *because* of the opportunity to work with lots of interesting people – with the band, and with Marvin [Smith, recording engineer], and with Erin, and with Jono [Sandilands, photographer and artwork designer], and anyone else that's been involved in the production of the whole thing.

"So it's not just been about writing and recording the songs, it's been all the other stuff around that. And I think it's been, in every respect, a really exciting collaboration

I think there's been a lot of energy and a lot of creativity gone into it, and that's really important to me. That's what I've taken most from the whole process."

Some things have not changed from one album to the next though. And the strength of Donald's writing is one of them. Solid, thoughtful and distinctive: there is no doubting his skills as a songwriter. His lyrics are intelligent; his melodies memorable. Nowhere on this album is there that hint of laziness that can so easily let a song down – the sloppy line, the weak verse.

The songs are complex, well crafted and well considered.

So how does it work then, this collaboration? How do the band take the raw material of these songs and turn them into something of their own? The process is quite simple, Donald says.

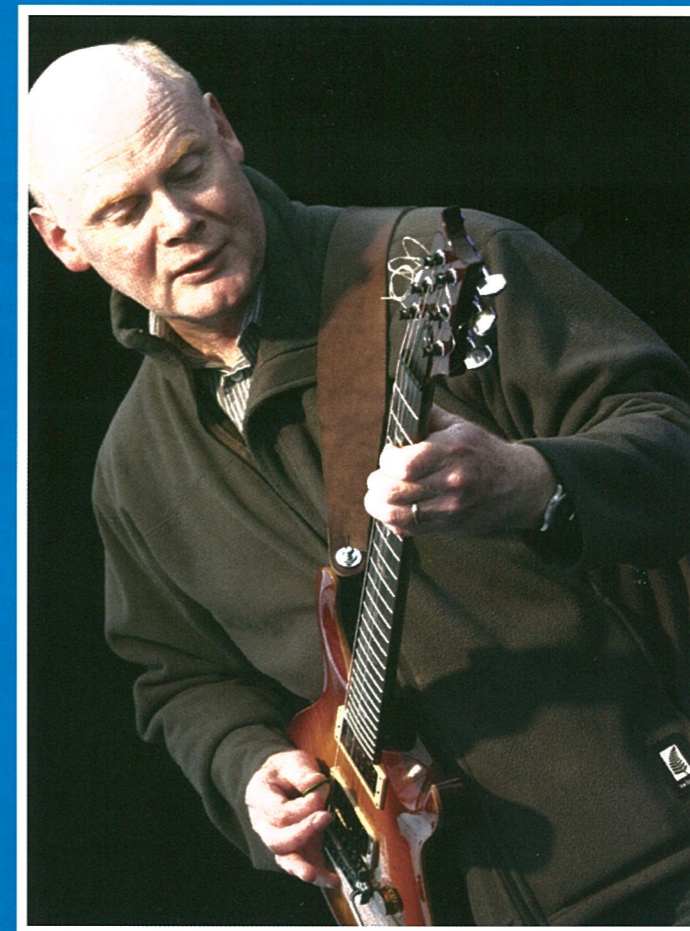
"I come with a new song and I just play it on the acoustic guitar for them, and they'll sit on the couch and listen, and sometimes they'll say 'Oh right, that's interesting'; and then we'll work at it. Sometimes it takes us ages, and other songs it just falls together much more readily.

"The two newest songs [on the album] – *Weathering* and *Bury My Heart* – were really fresh when we made the initial recording. They just seemed to fall together really quickly. But other songs have evolved, you know. We've played them live and they would get really long, and then by the time it came to recording we thought 'Well, we can't really have a song that goes on forever', so we would cut it. Generally in recording less is more, and what might not seem like a lot when you're playing live can seem interminable when it's been recorded."

Donald is right: on record, less can be more. And the process of cutting back has given the ten songs on this album a different kind of life. On stage – as those who have seen one of their all-too-infrequent performances will attest – the band allow themselves the space to inhabit the music fully. In particular, guitarist Alan McKay is given free rein. His solos fill out the songs, stretching and expanding them, making them new each time they're played. But here on record that freedom is curtailed, and what is left is a kind of thrilling potential energy.

As a guitarist, McKay has few if any equals in Shetland, and his playing is one of the highlights of this album. He does not dominate the sound but is instead a constant, simmering presence – a perfect foil to Donald's somewhat deep, and occasionally almost spoken, vocals.

The eagle-eyed (and eared) will quickly spot that there is one very definite connection between this album and Donald's debut. "In the Morning", the last track on the new CD, is not a new song at all. Indeed,



Photograph by Davie Gardner.

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it's been heard before, in acoustic form, on *Waterhead Sky*.

It's an odd choice in some ways, to go back to something already recorded. So why has this song returned? Why bother recording it again?

"The band wanted to do it" Donald says. "They were keen to have it on. And it's different. I wouldn't have done it if it was just a rerun of the original recording. Frankly I don't think one is better than the other, it's a different thing.

"It's one that we generally enjoy playing live so it takes on its own identity as a band song. And also it gave me time

to tighten up the lyrics. The lyrics in the last verse are a bit tighter than when I recorded them before.

"I suppose for me it reflects my own . . ." Donald hesitates for a moment before suggesting the next word, "*journey*" as a writer. It completes a circle, or something like that. It was good to have that as the last track.

"I spent a lot of time listening to different running orders [for the album], and . . . that particular recording in a sense has everything in it. If you think of the CD as a progression from the first track through to the last track, that one

has all of the ingredients from the rest of the record. There are subtle differences in shade even with the instrumentation . . . and 'In the Morning' has all of these aspects. It felt like a really nice way to end the CD."

There is nearly always a degree of modesty or reticence on display when artists speak about their work, and Donald is certainly no exception. When I ask whether he is happy with this new album he is unwilling to give a definite answer, and speaks instead of "accommodating the fact that it can never be perfect". "I'm not about to disown any of it", he adds.

But at the same time, it takes a certain confidence to put your name on something and throw it out there into the marketplace, where it may be judged by anyone who cares to make the effort. And though he might not say so directly, Donald does sound genuinely pleased with the album. It is the result of a great deal of time and effort, and even after the many hours spent listening and re-listening to it, he still finds a certain mystery there it seems.

"These songs just somehow fitted together. There's some kind of a thing going on that I don't have an answer for, or I can't neatly explain in a sentence or a soundbite. The songs are about that sense of not having an answer. And there being questions.

"And if I'm happy with anything about of it from a writing point of view – from how the album works or might work – it's the fact that it doesn't offer anything neat or easy or explained."

In Passing is a great collection of songs. Let's hope there's another one on the way soon. ■

