



# THE STRATHSPEY KING

## J. SCOTT SKINNER

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Produced for TOPIC by Tony Engle.

Sleeve notes by Alastair Hardie. Additional notes and sleeve design by Tony Russell.

Illustrative material from the collection of John Junner (except *Cradle Song* MS from James Duncan)

Location photography by Tony Russell.

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Devotees of the art of James Skinner have, up to now, had their appreciation restricted to those old 78s they were fortunate enough to own or could pick up in some antique shop. Now, with the issue of this disc and its accompanying volume *The Music of Scott Skinner* (12TS268), we have the chance to hear a wide selection of this unique artist's records - some of them very rare indeed. This has been achieved with the cooperation of Mr John W. R. Junner, to whose extensive record collection we are indebted for all the tracks on this LP.

Skinner was born in the Deeside town of Banchory in 1843. His musical education was initially in the hands of his brother Sandy, who taught him the violin and the art of vamping accompaniments on the 'cello. Skinner's abilities in this latter respect brought him into contact with the 'Taeland Minstrel' Peter Milne (1824-1908) and it was to this musician that he owed his early training in strathspey playing. In 1855 a six-year apprenticeship followed with an orchestra of young players, 'Dr Mark's Little Men'; it was during this period that Skinner consolidated his violinistic and theoretical skills under the guidance of Charles Rougier.

On returning to the northeast of Scotland, Skinner trained and practised as a dancing-master, and it was as a tribute to his teacher, 'Professor' William Scott, that he henceforth adopted the name James 'Scott' Skinner. His prowess on the violin, however, had been developing apace, a fact borne out by his notable success in an open violin competition held in Inverness in 1863.

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Skinner's first publication, a polka, dates from 1860. He went on to produce a remarkable total of over 600 pieces published either in sheet music form - the *Monikie* and *Cairngorm* series - or in his many collections, the most important of which are the *Miller o' Hirn Collection* (1881), the *Elgin Collection* (1884), the *Logie Collection* (1888), *The Scottish Violinist* (1900) and the *Harp and Claymore Collection* (1904).

Concert tours took Skinner to America on two occasions, in 1893 and 1926, and his stocky figure was a familiar part-of musical life in his native land for over sixty years. Proof of the esteem in which he was held by his fellow countrymen is afforded by the fact that it was an Aberdeen newspaper editor who dubbed him the 'Strathspey King', a title he bore undisputed till his death in 1927. He was buried in Aberdeen's Allenvale Cemetery and his grave is distinguished by a fine bronze bust which was unveiled to his memory in 1931.

Skinner originally intended **The President** to be named after the German Kaiser but was eventually persuaded to rename it in favour of the American head of state. Arranged by the celebrated northeastern folklorist Gavin Greig (editor of the *Harp and Claymore Collection*), it is in the form of a polka and trio with variations; use is made of a whole battery of violinistic effects - harmonics, left-hand pizzicati, thrown bow, etc. - not commonly found in the composer's more traditional output. An even rarer Skinner polka, the **Lucania** was titled after the ship of that name, and dedicated to its master, Capt. Mackay. (It was probably on this vessel that Skinner made his first voyage to America.)

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**The Freebooter, Tullochgorum** and **The East Neuk o' Fife** introduce the essence of Skinner's art. James MacPherson, the freebooter in question, is said to have penned this heroic air on the eve of his death - his illegal activities having resulted in his sentence to the gallows at Banff in 1700. *Tullochgorum* was first published in Bremner's 1757 collection and its quintessential Scottishness has inspired poetic praise from the national muse of both John Skinner and Robert Ferguson. Skinner adds some brilliant variations of his own as he does in *The East Neuk o' Fife*, yet another tune of considerable antiquity, coming from James Oswald's 1752 collection.

The following group of four Skinner tunes opens with the pastoral **Our Highland Queen**, written in 1881 and dedicated to Queen Victoria, but for some reason titled **Allegory** on the original record label. One of the composer's most popular strathspeys, **The Miller o' Hirn** comes from the collection of that name, as does **The Auld Wheel**. **Mackenzie Fraser** was published for the first time in Henderson's *Scottish Music Maker* of 1935.

Skinner's masterly variation-playing is well demonstrated in the three bagpipe marches. He regarded the **Athole Highlanders' Farewell to Loch Katrine**, a pipe quickstep composed by William Rose, 'as the king of pipe marches'. His own **Cameron Highlanders** pays tribute to a regiment in which the composer's brother served for eleven years. Of older vintage, **The Inverness Gathering** (or *Culloden Day*) makes more use of dotted rhythms, giving opportunities for some effective cross-bowing.

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**Arthur Seat** and **Eugene Stratton** are generally considered to be the finest of the Strathspey King's many hornpipes. Stratton was a celebrated 'coon' singer in Skinner's day; the tune will be found in the *Flowers of Scottish Melody*, having been transcribed from this recording by J. Murdoch Henderson. **Banks Hornpipe** - attributed to Parazotti - is believed to have been a Scottish export to America under the title *Kinloch's Grand Hornpipe*; its ultimate return, however, has found it changed in form and name.

Four of Skinner's friends are the dedicatees of the following group. **The Laird o' Thrums** (written for J. M. Barrie) gives unusual prominence to triplet rhythmic figuration - even the opening phrase features triplets rather than the customary dotted patterns. **Gavin M'Millan** was a Glaswegian who acted as the composer's agent in that area of Scotland. Without doubt the 'King's' most celebrated strathspey, **The Laird o' Drumblair** pays tribute to his friend and patron William McHardy; **Gladstone's Reel**, distinguished by its unusual four-strain structure, refers not to the famous politician but to an Edinburgh music lover.

Arguably Skinner's best-known composition, **The Bonnie Lass o' Bon Accord** was the tune chosen as his musical memorial - the opening bars being inscribed on the gravestone in Allenvale Cemetery. His reel **The Ten Pound Fiddle** is preceded by the **Marquis of Huntly's Farewell**, one of the finest strathspeys of William Marshall (1748-1833). Always a cornerstone of Skinner's repertoire, the Marshall strathspey gained him the laurels in the 1863 Inverness violin competition mentioned above.

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A further rendition of The Miller o' Hirn provides a rare opportunity to ascertain how the lapse of four years has affected the performer's interpretation. This tune is flanked by a further two strathspeys, Sandy Cameron and The Glenlivet. Note how a smooth transition into Glenlivet is facilitated by concluding on the first strain of The Miller o' Hirn.

Opening and concluding with the tune Triumph, the Triumph Country Dance track also features Timour the Tarter and the De'il Among the Tailors, both of which come from the 1884 Atholl Collection. Skinner adds some fine variations to the De'il, whose musical notes have to go here rhythm is a familiar fingerprint in Scottish music.



According to J. Murdoch Henderson, Skinner's reel The Left Handed Fiddler was dedicated to George Taylor Snr, although his son - also George Taylor - probably achieved even greater fame as a left-handed player. The second strain of this reel introduces a pastoral note with the violin imitating the call of the cuckoo. Speed the Plough was composed by John Morehead.

Home Sweet Home, played with all the appropriate glissandi, serves as the rather incongruous introduction to Skinner's own Iron Man and The Bungalow. The aforementioned William McHardy was the 'iron man' in question, and the reel refers to a cottage which he made available to the 'King', rent free, for several years. An interesting resemblance exists between the openings of these two tunes.

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The Cradle Song is subtitled Barcarolle in The Scottish Violinist but the fact that this tune is in simple as opposed to compound time makes it a rather loose description. Composed by Crockett, The Braes of Auchtertyre was first published in Stewart's collection but turns up in Mackenzie's Dance Music of Scotland (Book 3) in the guise of a reel in C. As arranged here the tune is characterised by some sonorous double stopping. Skinner concludes this group with his beloved Athole Highlanders' Farewell to Loch Katrine.

Skinner dedicated Glengrant to his 'esteemed friend James Grant of Glengrant', whereas Tulchan Lodge recalls the place where the composer, as a young man, had taught dancing to Lady Chetwode of Oakley. The Parrot, the only unaccompanied item on the disc, is a piece of trick fiddling probably picked up during the student years with Rougier. The pizzicati are of the kind executed by the left hand.

Writing in his Miller o' Hirn Collection Skinner states that solo strathspeys, such as Mrs Scott Skinner, are 'not dancing tunes'. Dedicated to the composer's first wife, he cites this one as his 'favourite for concerts'. The remaining two tunes (also by Skinner) are the strathspey Mackenzie Hay - written to the president of the London Caledonian Society - and the reel The Devil's Elbow.

*Alastair I. Hardie*  
*September 1975*

#### THE STRATHSPEY KING IN GRAND FORM.

In pursuance of his present tour through Scotland, Mr Scott Skinner and his concert party favoured Cupar with a visit on Tuesday evening. The Corn Exchange, in which the entertainment took place, was occupied by a large audience. It goes without saying that, capable as was every member of the concert party, Mr Scott Skinner was himself the star of the evening. Arrayed in the garb of Old Gaul, and wearing in brooch and sporran a wealth of precious stones that dazzled the eye, he brought with him the Andrea Guarnarius violin (1690) that was presented to him 40 years ago by Mr W. Grant of Carron and Eleclues. Its tone is superb in every string, and in the hands of such a master as the Strathspey King, it completely carried the audience away. The pieces played were either Mr Skinner's own composition or arrangement, and among the charming selections given were his famous "Bon-Accord" air, the "East Neuk o' Fife," and "Auld Robin Gray." His playing generally was characterised by the expression and Celtic fire peculiar to Highland music, and was in such demand that he had difficulty in getting down from the platform. The concert party have to be congratulated on the good taste that marked the selection of their songs, many of which, such as "Cam ye by Athole," by Miss Rene Bishop (soprano); "Doon the Burn, Davie Lad" by Miss Gladys Cooper (contralto); and "Macgregor's Gathering" by J. Elliot Tulloch (baritone), are too seldom heard nowadays on our concert platforms. The trio "Ye Banks and Braes" was beautifully rendered as a part song by these artists, and the "Il Travatore" duet, "Home to our Mountains," received admirable treatment from Miss Cooper and Mr Tulloch. Delightful variety was lent to the entertainment by the smart and dainty step dancing of Miss Cathie Macdonald, who was loudly applauded. Miss Hamilton had a heavy task as pianist, but was equal to every demand made upon her, and at the close, Mr Rose Wood, manager, expressed on Mr Scott Skinner's behalf

his thanks for the large patronage bestowed, and on the artists' behalf their thanks for the attention given them-the audience, he said, having been the most appreciative they had had in their tour. At the close several members of the audience went to the ante-room, and congratulated Mr Scott Skinner on his playing. One of these was a lady who with her family had motored in from the country, and she informed the Strathspey King that she knew no difference in his personal appearance since she had been one of his pupils in Aberdeenshire, notwithstanding that the "King" is now within a month or two of being eighty years old.

REPRINT FROM Fife Herald and Journal, 27TH  
SEPTEMBER. 1922.

#### Scott Skinner on Record

The playing of Scott Skinner was quite extensively documented during the first quarter-century or so of the recording era, and it is probable that more than a hundred of his performances were committed to cylinders and discs. The earliest are believed to have been a group recorded in Glasgow in September 1899 for BERLINER. Within the next few years Skinner recorded numerous cylinders for STERLING and PATHE, many of the latter being later transferred to vertical-cut discs.

On January 30, 1905, Skinner journeyed to London to record for the GRAMOPHONE & TYPEWRITER COMPANY (ancestor of HMV), probably at the studio at 21 City Road. From that session comes the Cradle Song group (master 1687e, issued on Gramophone Concert record G.C.-7994) (Side 2/ Track 5). Half a dozen other pieces were recorded on that date, all but one being issued.

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Towards the end of that year, on December 1, Skinner revisited the G&T studio to record another half-dozen tunes. Of these this LP includes the Allegory group (master 3172e, issued on Twin T-5091 [Zonophone Serial 114]) and the Freebooter group (master 3173e, issued on Twin T-5088 [Zonophone serial 113]). (The issue numbers cited here are not necessarily those of the first releases but denote the pressings used for these reissues.)

In January 1910 Skinner went to London for the COLUMBIA company, recording some 20-odd titles, probably at their Oxford Street studio, for issue on the Rena label. These performances, made at his prime, have provided the majority of the selections on this LP and *The Music of Scott Skinner* (12TS268). Included here are the Celebrated Hornpipes (26744, Regal Zonophone G6616), Highland Schottische No. 2 (26747, Regal Zonophone G6618), Lucania Polka (2674Q, Regal G6622), Highland Reels (26751, Regal Zonophone G6616), Triumph Country Dance (26757, Regal G6622), Bagpipe Marches (26758, Regal G6624), Medley No. 2 (26762, Regal G6624) and The President (26763, Columbia Rena I2QI). As will be seen, the original Rena issues were eventually replaced by Regals, some of which remained in catalogue well beyond Skinner's death, to be transferred in the '30s to the Regal Zonophone label.

Also during 1910 appeared a series of EDISON cylinders, two of 2-minute and three of 4-minute duration. It is possible that they were recorded about the time Skinner was in London for Columbia; at any rate, they almost certainly belong to this period.

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Skinner's final session came a dozen years later, in the latter part of November 1922, at the Columbia studios at 108 Clerkenwell Road, London. Again, some 20 performances may have been recorded; all that were issued were on the REGAL label. Reproduced here are the Home Sweet Home group (73053, Regal G7913), the Mrs. Scott Skinner group (73075, Regal G8022) and the Glengrant group (73076, Regal G8022). The piano accompanist was Ethel Stuart (later Ethel Key), Skinner's niece.

The instrument with which Skinner made probably all his recordings was a Stroh violin. This is an instrument lacking the conventional violin's wooden body, the acoustic role of which is assumed by a metal diaphragm, connected to the bridge, and a metal horn, which amplifies and directs the sound. Stroh violins were better suited than conventional models to the acoustic recording process, and most of the early recorded violinists used them.  
Tony Russell

**Scott Skinner's American Journey, 1926**  
From *The People's Journal*, March 13, 1926:

SCOTT SKINNER ON HIS VISIT TO AMERICA  
To Compete for World's Championship in Fiddling  
(Special to "People's Journal")

Mr. J. Scott Skinner, at the advanced age of 82 years, is on the point of leaving for the United States to uphold the prestige of "Puir Auld Scotland" in the realm of fiddling.

The international contest at Lewiston, Portland Bay, Maine, to decide the violin championship of the world in strathspeys, reels and jigs, for wielders of the bow over sixty years of age, is to take place on April 5th, and extend over the following live days; and the Campbell Clan Society, charged with selecting a representative of this country, has chosen "the Strathspey King", known all over the British Isles and further afield as a unique exponent of the national music.

#### 1000 Dollars and Cup Prize

The promoters of the contest, one of whom is Mr. Henry Ford, of motor car fame, are the members of the Scottish Clans of America, and the prize attaching to the championship is 1000 dollars (£200) and a silver cup of the value of £100. The latter becomes the absolute property of the winner.

Entries have been received from Ireland, Canada, New Brunswick Island, Prince Rupert Island, and from all parts of the great Republic. Mr. Scott Skinner is the only one put forward on behalf of Scotland, and, as I have said, he is the nominee of the Campbell Clan Society.

In the octogenarian's native Banchory, and the North Country generally, the news of the engagement has caused quite a thrill. Old friends and admirers are especially jubilant. They recall the veteran's age, speak of the enterprise as the most daring in a life which has been full of adventure, and the jogs of fate, and, extending to him their full-souled laudation of his pluck, wish him success in an event which, if pulled off, will, indeed, put the crown on a long, and, in many respects, remarkable career.

Wishing to see "the King" (as his friends call him) myself, and to get from him a first-hand indication of how he regards the trip across the Atlantic, I called on Wednesday afternoon at his lodgings at 25 Victoria Street, Aberdeen.

#### What Doctor Told Him

The old man was still abed. "Just taking a long lie," he whimsically apologised, "to make sure that I'll be as fit as my own fiddle when we start out for Uncle Sam's and God's own country tomorrow (Thursday) morning. I'm feeling fine."

"Do you know this," he went on to say, "that my doctor gave me an overhaul the other day and told me I was good for another twenty years? Eighty-two and twenty more years to go - that's 'no bad!' "

"What about this fiddling test?" I asked.

"Oh, it's a great affair," he replied. "The Scottish Clans Society is at the back of it, but behind it again is Henry Ford and his millions. Ford's like me. He's tired of this everlasting jazz and tango music, and wants to get back and take us with him to the national and classical melodies. That's the stuff. Ford is on the spot again."

"Then what are your arrangements for the journey?" I asked.

"My housekeeper could tell you all about the trunks and boxes we are taking," he remarked with a laugh, "but you wouldn't be interested in these. Well, we set out tomorrow and sail on Saturday, the 13th, from Liverpool for Boston. There are to be great ongoings on my arrival, I understand. Representatives of all the Scottish Clan Societies are to assemble to meet me - Henry Ford in command and, headed by a powerful pipe band, I'm to be made a 'show of' in a

procession round the principal parts of that highbrow town.

From America I hear further that the cinematographers are to be on the job, and very likely before you see me back in Aberdeen you'll get me in the picture houses."

#### Engagements Pouring In

"How long will you be away, Mr. Skinner?" I asked.

"Oho! I wish I could say. My passports are for a three months' stay, but there have been so many inquirers wanting to fix up engagements with me - all sorts of 'stunts', you know - that really - oh, well, I can't say. At the same time, I am not to let our American friends overwork me."

"Man," he added, throwing up his arms, "I think I'm going to enjoy myself. My friends will be glad to know that, while I'm a wee bit excited at the prospect, I'm in good fettle; and my housekeeper, who is accompanying me, will see to it that I don't overtax my strength while I'm on the other side."

#### Congratulatory Messages

Before bidding Mr. Skinner good-bye, I learned that he had been deluged with letters and telegrams from friends in all parts of the country congratulating him on the honour that has come his way, and wishing him all success. One admirer in Banchory hopes he will be able to give the Americans a Deeside "dichtin'," and a parish kirk minister, a lifelong intimate, sent the following communication :-

My Dear and Game Old Friend,  
Well this is news indeed! - and among the men over 60 assembled in Lewiston, Portland, Maine, U.S.A., "Old-Time Fiddlers," I predict you'll easily bear the bree, and be a mile abune them a' . . . By the Eye of Imagination I see a vast concourse of Uncle Sams and Yanky-Doodles, and "Henry Ford" seated on throne, heavily embroidered velvet and gold, made out of the frame of the first Ford car he designed and made - then, the doors having been thrown open by his footmen in uniforms bespattered with the star-spangled symbols - I see the figure of the venerable composer of "Tulchan Lodge" and innumerable other airs advancing and making a low bow, and Henry Ford standing up, with the steering rod of his Ford for a mace in his right hand, and in good English with heavily nasal accented tones saying: "Mr. Scott Skinner, before proceeding to action, open your mouth until my dentist-in-chief examines your teeth to see if, before God and this dentist, you are over 60 years of age" - and on hearing that the kilted Aberdonian is over 80 I see Henry Ford falling backwards and having to be assisted to his seat. Well, well, it is all most exciting, and will be the star turn of the whole musical seance . . . I wish you God speed and bon voyage and a safe return, with at least £100 in your spleuchan, and a bag full of stories of all the funny people you'll meet and the queer places you'll see.

It only needs to be added that the whole expenses of the trip will be borne by the Scottish Clans Society of America.

The front and back sleeve photographs are of Scott Skinner, the former dating from 1903. The MS of Cradle Song is in Skinner's own hand; on the reverse the composer has written ' "Simplicity of form does not necessarily mean dearth of genius." Nature is the thing. . . A sadder air I have never penned.'

TOPIC thanks Mr. John Junner of Banchory, Kincardineshire, for his kind loan of the original records reissued here and for all his assistance in the production of this LP. Thanks also to Brian Rust for discographical assistance.

Other TOPIC records of Scots fiddle music include The Music of Scott Skinner (12TS268) by Bill Hardie and Scott Skinner, and James F. Dickie's Delights (12T279) by James F. Dickie.

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Cradlesong. I. Maerkel. 300 songs

Melody by Scott McLean  
arranged by Gamini Ma.

*Pedal - Cradle Rocking*

*Cres:                      dim:*  
Poverty stricken. homeless neglected dying. no help. normal press, coal pile empty