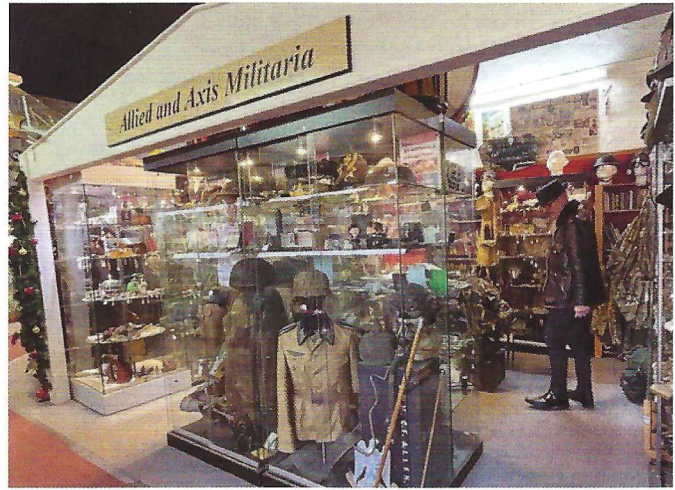




DAVE CANTWELL

MUSIC AND MILITARIA

David Milloy

It's often said that lucky is the person who makes a living from doing something they love. On that basis, it's fair to say that Dave Cantwell is a very lucky man indeed, having forged concurrent careers out of not one but two of the things he loves most: music and military history.

Let's start with music, Dave, how did you get into drumming?

I wanted to be in a band when I was a kid. I wasn't really fussed about which instrument I played; I just wanted to be in a band. I got a guitar but wasn't exactly a great player so decided that I should give drumming a try instead. My mother wasn't exactly supportive at first, saying "There'll be no drums in this house!" That didn't stop me, though. I had a Saturday job and saved up to buy a drum kit. To my surprise, my mum didn't go mad at me when the drum kit was delivered. Instead, she said that since I now had a drum kit, I'd better take some lessons. Once I had learned the basics, I started to play in local bands and later combined this with a job in the Stirling branch of Bruce's Records, which was then owned by Bruce and Brian Findlay.

The Bruce Findlay that managed Simple Minds?

The very man.

How did that go – holding down a full-time job whilst also playing in bands?

It wasn't easy. I was constantly asking to get away early on Fridays and asking for Saturdays off as well as turning up to work on Mondays having literally just returned from playing gigs in the Highlands. Eventually, the store manager said he'd make me assistant manager if I quit playing music – a fair offer as he could easily have fired me instead.

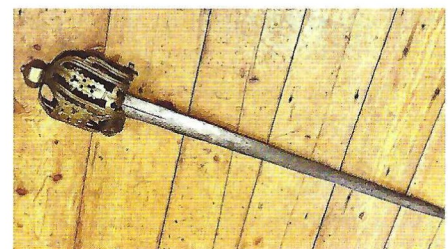
Did you quit playing?

No, but that's not what I told him! Bruce's Records used to run adverts in local newspapers, and after I claimed to have put down my drumsticks they ran one which included the line, "Ex-rock star Dave Cantwell works here." I've still got a copy of it.



You eventually became a full-time musician, though.

Yes, I was the band leader of the house band at Tiffany's in Edinburgh for a while. It then closed for six months for renovations and the house band was moved down to Tiffany's in Newcastle. We were supposed to return to Edinburgh but when it reopened, having been rebranded as Cinderella's, we were instead kept on at Tiffany's in Newcastle. The manager at Cinderella's wanted us to return to Edinburgh but the manager at Tiffany's in Newcastle insisted that we stay there. When I asked the general manager of the company that owned both venues when we would be returning to Edinburgh, he said "Son, Newcastle is your residency now. You're here until you leave or the punters get fed up with you." I stayed for two and a half years because it was steady work and the pay was good.

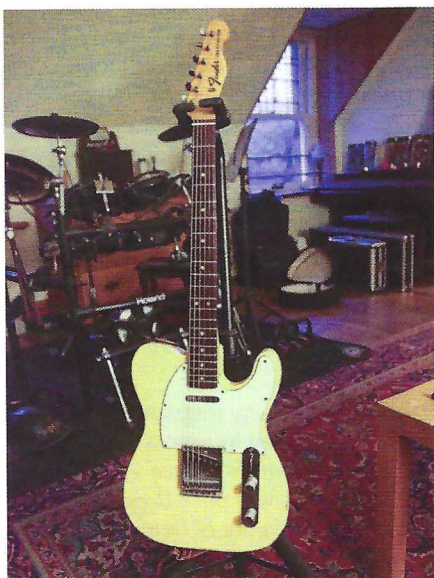


And after that?

I played with John Martyn's backing band on his *Piece by Piece* tour. I was then asked to audition for a band named The Big Dish. They were signed to Virgin Records, who had very high hopes for them. I got the job and joined them just after they had finished recording their first album, *Swimmer*.

How long were you with them?

About 18 months. My first gig with The Big Dish was a two-day Artists against Apartheid festival at Barrowlands, at which Lloyd Cole, Billy Bragg, and Love & Money also played. Dougie Vipond of Deacon Blue joined us on percussion for those gigs. I've still got my 'access all areas' pass for that gig plus a host of other bits and bobs from my time with the band.



Any particular highlights of that time?

After doing a tour in which we played at colleges and universities, we supported Big Country on part of their *The Seer* tour, which was a great experience. Shortly after that, we were flown to the USA to meet with music executives from Warner Bros. Needless to say, we had a great time. One of the highlights of our trip was shooting a video for 'Slide', one of the singles from the album, at Burbank Studios in Hollywood. Our measurements having been taken, we arrived on the set to find a huge rack of clothes, the sort of designer gear that you'd find in shops on Rodeo Drive, for us to wear in the video. Better still, we got to keep those clothes as well as a load of merchandise given to us by Warner Bros. My other particularly strong memory of that trip is of a chance encounter I had with someone involved in a huge political scandal in the 1960s.



Who was that and how did it come about?

The airline had overbooked the plane for our return flight to the UK and had to bump 16 or 17 people from the flight. When that was sorted out, I was lucky enough to be upgraded to Business Club whilst the rest of the band were in Economy Class. I got bored and started a conversation with the woman next to me. She was very pleasant and we soon discovered that we had a shared love of 1960s music. From that point on we got on like a house on fire and chatted for the whole flight. She told me her name but it didn't register with me. It was only after I left the plane that the band's manager, Steve Cheyne, said that the woman I'd been chatting to was the double of Mandy Rice-Davies. He was taken aback when I said that she was Mandy Rice-Davies and even more surprised when I admitted that I'd no idea that she was famous let alone what she was famous for!

Another good memory from around that time was our appearance on a children's TV show, *Number 73*. We played live and the show was broadcast live, so there was no room for error. It was like playing a gig in front of a few million people. The concept of the show was that it was broadcast from a house, so we had to ring a doorbell before being admitted to the house by Frank Sidebottom (who went on to become a cult comic character) and then make our way over all sorts of obstacles to the 'stage' in what was supposed to be the house's basement. When my gran saw the episode, she was worried that I'd been made to wait too long at the front door of the house as it was cold outside. She didn't realise that the house was just a set in a studio!

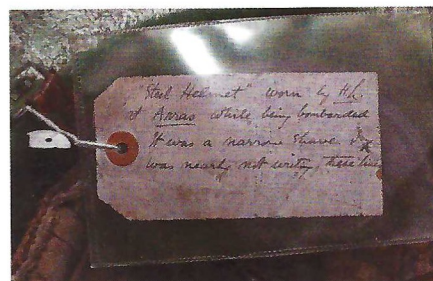
Do you appear on any of the band's records?

I left just as The Big Dish's second album was about to be recorded, though I do appear on some of the tracks later used as 'B' sides. They were a great band who somehow didn't get the commercial success they deserved. I'm proud to have played with them.

Would it be fair to say that you've since drummed for quite a few bands?

Yes, I've been around! I'm currently playing with two bands: Ceilidhdonia and The Greig Taylor Band. I also record with other artists, including Scott Ashworth, whose debut album, *Ghosts and Broken Men* was released earlier this year and has done well.

Ceilidhdonia has been going for a long time and plays a mixture of traditional Scottish music and pop music. We've played in some far-flung places, including Libya (when Gaddafi was still in power) and Angola.



How did that go?

Absolutely fine, although two of the lads in the band didn't want to go to Angola because they thought it was dangerous. I pointed out that a Saturday night in their hometown, which had perhaps better remain nameless, was likely to be much more dicey than a trip to Angola, but they remained unconvinced!



And the Greig Taylor Band?

We're a five-piece blues-rock outfit. One of my old chums from The Big Dish, Brian McFie, plays guitar in the band, which also features Nelson McFarlane on bass, Kenny Clark on drums, and of course Greig Taylor himself. Greig has a terrific voice and is a great songwriter. Our first album, *The Light*, was well received when it was released in 2023. We've recently laid down some new tracks in the studio and we'll be announcing some live dates soon.

How important is playing live to you as a musician?

It's when the magic really happens. There's nothing quite like it. That's also true from an audience perspective. You don't need to spend a fortune to be able to see a great band perform live. It's often a lot cheaper than going to a football match and there's much less risk of you coming away disappointed.

Am I right in thinking that you also play the bagpipes?

Yes, I was a piper in the Territorial Army/Army Reserve for 31 years and travelled the world with military bands. It was one such trip that I first met Viv, to whom I've now been married for 26 years. Music's been very good to me.

Aside from music, I understand your other great passion is military history.

Indeed. Like many men of my age, I was an avid reader of 'Commando' books and military comic strips as a child. I also found some old pieces of military kit – gas masks, binoculars, that sort of thing – that had been stowed away by family members after the war. These were great playthings, but it was through them that I became interested in the human stories behind the objects.

And that led you to start collecting militaria?

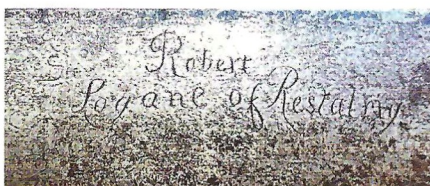
It did. Like any collector, you start small and work your way up, buying and selling items as you go. Eventually, it turned into a business although I very much remain a collector at heart.

Tell us about some of the favourite pieces in your collection.

I've got a steel helmet worn by Harry Lauder when he visited the front lines in 1917. Following the death in action of his only son, John, at the end of 1916, Harry was distraught and tried to enlist but was rejected because of his age. He therefore started a campaign to raise money to help wounded soldiers return to health and reintegrate into civilian life, his aim being to raise £1,000,000 – a phenomenal amount of money at that time. He also went to entertain the troops in France in 1917. As he was close to the fighting, he was issued with a steel helmet. I acquired it at an auction some years ago and have since been offered a hefty sum for it by an American collector. I turned down his offer as I feel the helmet, which belonged to one of Scotland's most famous sons, should stay in his home country.

You've also got an engine room clock from the German battleship Tirpitz.

Indeed. The Tirpitz spent much of the war in Norwegian waters and was eventually sunk in a Fjord by the RAF in 1944. She lay upside-down in shallow waters so it was relatively easy for the Norwegians to strip her for scrap after the war. During the salvage process, items were removed from inside her hull, including a brass clock in the engine room. This was later presented to Edmund Goddard, a member of the crew of a British mini-submarine (known as an X-craft) which had attacked and damaged the Tirpitz before the RAF sank her. It was sold to me by his daughter after being on display in the Submarine Museum at Gosport for a number of years. Its build quality is amazing and it remains in great condition to this day.



It's an item that tells many stories.

Absolutely, and that's where my interest really lies. Every item I buy has its own story or stories to tell. For example, I own a Scottish broadsword that once belonged to Robert Logan (or 'Logane' as he was also known), the Earl of Restalrig. In the early 17th century, he was accused (almost certainly on the basis of lies) of being involved in the 'Gowrie plot' to murder James VI of Scotland. The Crown, no doubt eager to get its hands on his lands and titles, decided to prosecute him so that his estates would be forfeited. Although he had been dead for three years, his body was disinterred, taken to court, and tried for treason. Needless to say, he was convicted!

What's the largest item in your collection?

A Willys Jeep from 1944. It went ashore on or slightly after D-Day and was used by the US Army before being given to the French Army. It remained in use with them till 1968. It's been restored and is roadworthy. It's great fun to drive but it's a bit too cold to use it at this time of year, though!

You also collect Beatles merchandise.

Oh yes. They're my favourite band. I've got quite a lot of period Beatles toys and souvenirs as well as a couple of rolls of genuine 1960s Beatles wallpaper made by Crown!

Do you possess any instruments previously owned by any of the Beatles?

I wish! I do, however, own a Fender Telecaster that was once the property of Ritchie Blackmore of Deep Purple and Rainbow fame. I can't play it like him, though!

One final question: who is your favourite Beatle?

Ringo. We drummers have to stick together!

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