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Music



A GIG FOR THE GIG. Sheila na Gig's Celtic music mastery will grace this Sunday's Ben Lomond Scottish Fling.

Dave Barber

If all you can think of when someone mentions flings are the backseats of certain early-model Chevrolets, Ben Lomond has just the antidote for you this Sunday.

Far from being another exercise of the loose or sordid sort, the Ben Lomond Scottish Fling is a distinctive, celebratory homage to the town's roots and ancestry. No doubt it has that craggy Scottish vintner, John Burns, doing jigs in his grave. It was he who had the village named after a hamlet in the Buchanan Clan territory of Scotland back when it was little more than a gritty logging camp.

Scotland has never generated much big press. It didn't have the sprawling empire of Mother England and its

Ben Lomond Is Clan Destined

history doesn't make for such hot reading next to Ireland's tempestuous chronicles. It doesn't even have a prince of its own like Wales. The Scotch did give us the game of golf, to the enduring delight of American presidents and physicians, but the country also possesses a deeper and more compelling cultural legacy than is often conceded to it.

For this reason, the Scottish Fling is more than a healthy reminder that it wasn't just the Spanish who took kindly to the local environs. In addition to saluting the fortitude and resourcefulness of the town's founding Scotch settlers, the Ben Lomond festival provides a glimpse of the wealth and wild originality of the larger Scottish traditions.

Ben Lomond threw its first fling in 1963. That was the year that its spirited citizenry rallied for and won the name of "Loch Lomond" for the lake at the rear of their nearby reservoir. The Fling was an annual affair until falling prey to a spell of neglect in the mid-1970s. Its revival is marked not only by a kindling of civic pride but by a greater sophistication that does more careful and ultimately valuable justice to the traditions being evoked.

Kilt-clad Highland dancers and furiously bright tam o'shanter will be out in force and will trigger the usual warm, familiar responses. But perhaps the most fascinating and stirring authentic contribution to the proceedings will be the performance of Sheila na Gig, hailed practitioners of Celtic music and passionate caretakers of Gaelic folklore, history and legend.

Authenticity alone isn't what sets Sheila na Gig apart. Much of it has to do with the way that the ensemble sheds light on some of the darker ages and aspects of Celtic and Gaelic history. *Sheila na gig* means "Sheila of the Breasts" in Irish Gaelic; the name is a reference to ancient fertility goddesses rendered in stone by the earliest Celt cultures.

Co-founders Sean and Sharon Folsom have always meant for Sheila na Gig to embrace Celtic heritage in all its various eras and incarnations. This means incorporating the music and dress of Celtic-influenced regions like Brittany and Nova Scotia into their act. It means doing thorough homage to areas where the Gaelic tongue presided — landscapes like West Ireland and the highlands of Scotland. Ballasting the Folsoms' entire relationship with these times and places is their conviction that there is a strong, fundamental unity to all pre-Christian European culture from "Ireland to Western Siberia."

Aside from all those vivid tartans, the Scottish phenomenon most indelibly stamped on the popular imagination must be their inimitable bagpipes. No other object or instrument speaks so essentially for the brooding hillsides of windswept Scottish heather. The pipes will probably always inspire deprecatory debates over just which dying animal they really sound like most, but there will also always be pipers like Sean Folsom who are more than a match for such derision.

Folsom plays well over two dozen instruments, Celtic and otherwise, but his dexterity with the pipes is his prime accomplishment. As might be gathered from the most cursory of listens, cajoling fine music out of this unwieldy wind instrument is no mean feat. Folsom, however, has mastered a startling gamut of pipes and piping styles: the Northumbrian pipes, the Irish Uilleann pipes and even the Flemish, Spanish and Bulgarian pipes. He is a member of the exclusive Northumbrian Pipers' Society, a renowned bagpipe reedmaker, and his powerful renderings of early Celtic pipe melodies is the core of Sheila na Gig's offerings.

Any honest portrayal of Celtic traditions cannot sever one of its performing arts from another. Sheila na Gig doesn't. Its presentations are tapestries of music, dance, poetry and storytelling. Audience participation is most encouraged. Although the six-member group has made countless Bay Area appearances at folk clubs, universities, Renaissance Faires and museums, the Ben Lomond Scottish Fling has to be one of the better contexts they've come across for showcasing their considerable talents. □