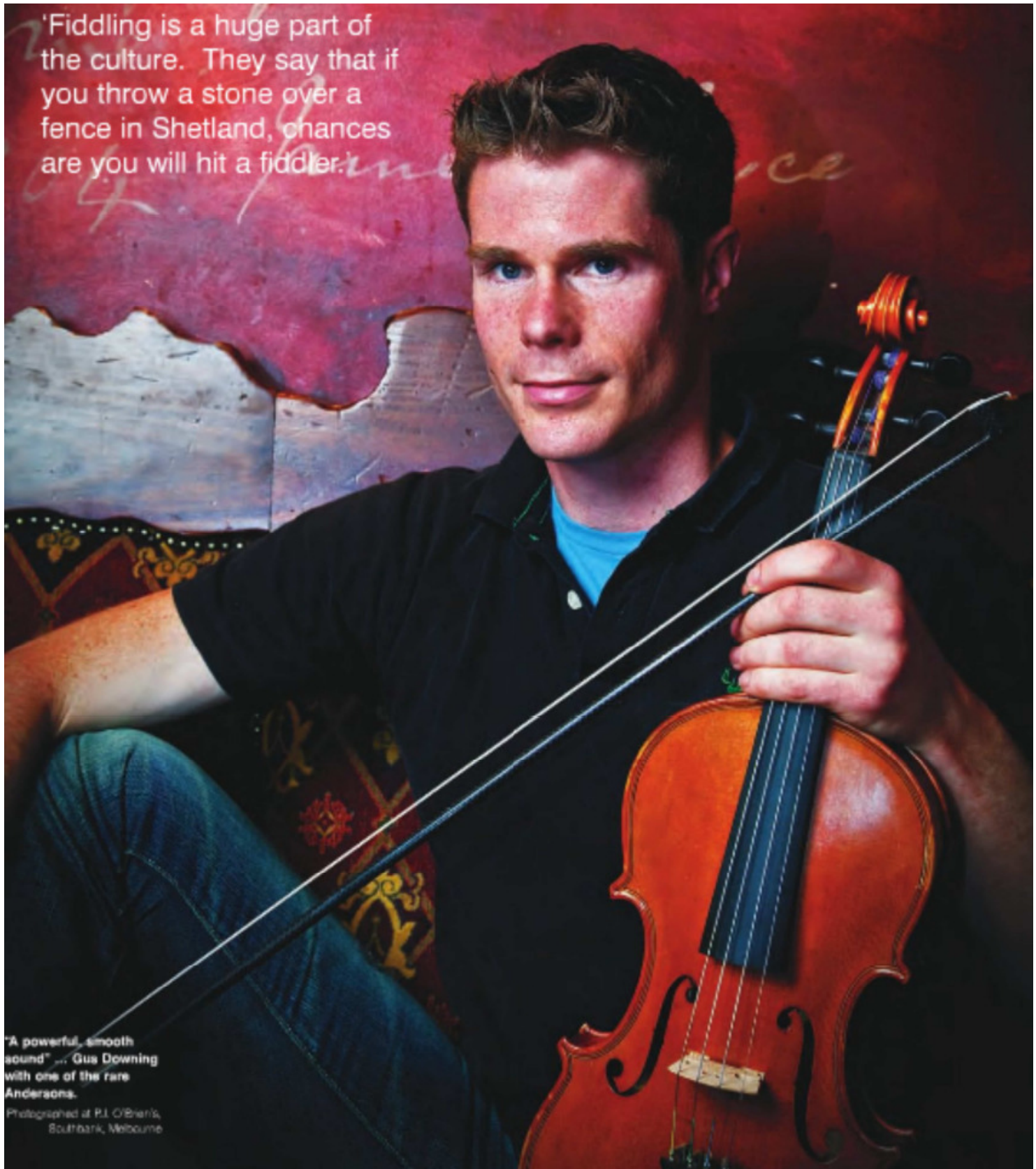


Strung together

Melbourne lawyer and amateur musician Gus Downing didn't know he was famous until he lobbed in The Shetland Islands in search of the elusive Anderson #16. Interview: Lawrence Money. Photos: Jaime Murcia.



Strung together

Melbourne lawyer and amateur musician Gus Downing didn't know he was famous until he lobbied in The Shetland Islands in search of the elusive Anderson #16. Interview: **Lawrence Money**. Photos: **Jaime Murcia**.

The story began five years ago, when Bill Sides' cousin threw a party in Melbourne for their aunt's 80th birthday and hired Judy Turner, from Melbourne's Scottish Fiddle Club, to play. Judy was asked to play a special violin, one made by Bill's grandfather John Anderson who'd migrated from the Shetland Islands in 1912.

Judy was curious. She had not heard of Anderson violins before; were there any others? Oh yes, said the family, and produced another four. "She wanted to know more," recalls Bill, "just how many my grandfather had made. I wasn't sure and decided to track them down. My grandfather didn't sell his violins, he gave them to children and grandchildren for special occasions: weddings, 21st birthdays, that sort of thing.

"They are good instruments. I played violin myself as a child – not very well – and used to visit my grandfather in the shed at his house where he made them."

Bill's detective work eventually found 26 Anderson violins, each numbered. Yet there are thought to be almost 50, one of which – said to be #16 – found its way back to John Anderson's homeland, the Shetland Islands, where fiddling is as much a part of the culture as kicking a footy is here.

Bill also put some money towards a scholarship that would send a Melbourne fiddler to Shetland one year and bring a Shetland fiddler to Melbourne the next.

That's where Melbourne lawyer Gus Downing comes into the picture. Gus, 28, is the first Shetland scholarship winner, just back from that Scottish outpost – although that is a somewhat thorny subject. "I was put back in my box about two things as soon as I arrived," says Gus. "It's dangerous to call a Shetlander Scottish. Shetland was given to Scotland by Norway in 1468 as a dowry but Shetlanders don't consider themselves Scots. And they don't like to say The Shetlands; you either say Shetland or The Shetland Islands."

There are only 12,000 people on Shetland and Gus was an instant celebrity. "On my first day, there was a big article in the Shetland Times and everyone knew who I was. They'd say, 'You must be the famous fiddler!' Fiddling is a huge part of the culture. They say that if you throw a stone over a fence in Shetland, chances are you will hit a fiddler. I walked into a bar that had fiddles hanging on the wall like pool cues. If you didn't have a fiddle, you could use one of those. Not the world's best instruments but it's a great idea."

And before we go further, what's the difference between

fiddles and violins? "Same instrument, different way of playing" says Gus. "A lot people who play folk music are self-taught, so they often hold the bow further up. Classical players always hold it at the end and would say the (folk technique) is bad. But a lot of classical players couldn't play a folk tune in a traditional way."

Shetland Islanders credit insurance salesman Tom Anderson, a renowned 20th century fiddler, for saving their musical culture. Tom (thought to be a distant relative of John Anderson) was known as Muckle Tammie (Big Tommy) and, as he travelled in his work, he collected the folk tunes which had been passed on between generations but rarely written down. Big Tommy played a major part in forming the Shetland Fiddles Society in 1961. Says Gus: "Tom also got the teaching of Shetland fiddles introduced in Shetland schools."

Gus arrived in Shetland with the 78-year-old Anderson fiddle #10, which he borrowed from Bill Sides, to play in the islands' music festival, the Shetland Fiddle Frenzy. But he had a secondary mission: to find that Anderson fiddle on Shetland, the reputed #16. It proved easy; Gus encountered the owner, Graham Jamieson, at the Fiddle Frenzy. "He'd bought it for his son 25 years earlier for 35 pounds," Gus says. "Although it doesn't get played very often now, it is a beautiful instrument with a powerful, smooth sound."

John Anderson, who died in 1974 aged 92, was in his 20s when he migrated to Australia as a railway worker. His wife-to-be, Mary Sinclair, had gone on ahead of him, working as a nurse in Frankston. They married 10 days after he arrived.

Gus is not sure why he was attracted to the violin but the love affair began early. "I was about five," he says. "Mum played the clarinet. I think I bullied my parents into it. When I was about 12, I went to the Suzuki summer school. Judy Turner was teaching an elective on Scottish fiddle. And I had a few Scottish CDs; I used to love playing along. But I played classical to the end of high school and in the first few years at uni. I played in the Chamber Strings of Melbourne."

The call of the fiddle seems to be growing stronger. Gus has quit his job as an immigration lawyer with the "official reason" that he did not want to specialise too early. "But there were other influences," he admits. "I always wanted to keep music as a hobby because I didn't want to do it for the wrong reasons. But I think if I'm going to spend my life working at something, it should be something that I love."

Lawrence Money writes Money's Melbourne in The Age