

# Sunshine on Leith - the feel-good musical of the year!

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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The feel-good musical film of the year is here! It's Sunshine On Leith, which weaves an entertaining and significant romance around the songs of Scottish band The Proclaimers.

If you don't know who The Proclaimers are, just says the words: "But I would walk 500 miles, and I would walk 500 more, Just to be the man who walked a thousand miles to fall down at your door," and everyone will know who you are talking about.

Home is where the heart is for best pals Davy (George Mackay) and Ally (Kevin Guthrie). Returning from duty in Afghanistan to their lifelong residence in Leith, just outside Edinburgh, the lads kindle romances old and new: Ally with Davy's sister Liz (Freya Mavor), and Davy with Yvonne (Antonia Thomas), his little sis' best friend from work. Meanwhile, their parents Rab (Peter Mullan) and Jean (Jane Horrocks) are busy planning their 25th wedding anniversary. Everything's going swimmingly until a revelation from Rab's past threatens to tear the family and all three couples apart.



## No biographical links

In the same way that Mamma Mia! bears no relation to the lives of the four members of Swedish pop quartet ABBA, Sunshine On Leith carries no biographical links to Charlie and Craig Reid, the identical twin brothers who form The Proclaimers.

Born in Leith in 1962, Craig and Charlie Reid grew up in Edinburgh, Cornwall and Auchtermuchty in Fife. At home, they

listened to Jerry Lee Lewis, Merle Haggard and Hank Williams. At school they played in punk bands and formed The Proclaimers in 1983, rapidly acquiring a fervent live following in Scotland.

They unveiled their first record 'This Is The Story', in 1987, and have gone on to release a further eight studio albums, including 'Sunshine On Leith' in 1988, which spawned their most well-known hit, the instantly recognisable and insanely catchy I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles). But it took two decades for someone to realise that the band's songs shouldn't just be performed in rock venues.

## Out of a bottle of whisky

"Sunshine On Leith happened, like all the best things, out of a bottle of whisky," says screenwriter Stephen Greenhorn. In 2005, Greenhorn was trying to drum up an idea for a Scottish musical to workshop and develop with his friend James Brining, Artistic Director of the Dundee Repertory Theatre. Despite their best efforts, however, the pair's brainstorming had drawn blanks.

"One night I was getting drunk and listening to the first Proclaimers album, 'This Is The Story'," Greenhorn recalls. "Halfway through the album, they stop playing and start to talk. I thought: 'This sounds like it's from a musical,' and started thinking about all The Proclaimers' songs I knew and how they all could be from a musical. I wrote down 'The Proclaimers musical' on the back of an envelope and went to bed. The next morning, I'd completely forgotten about it until I saw the envelope."

After they'd secured the permission of the Reid brothers and their long-time manager Kenny Macdonald, Greenhorn spent the next two years developing the show alongside Brining and several actors at Dundee Rep. When the first production was finally mounted in 2007, Sunshine on Leith acquired a spectacular momentum that would eventually carry it to the big screen. "Thank god I wrote the idea down!" laughs the writer.



## Best British musical since Blood Brothers

The original run in Scotland was a sell-out, prompting two further tours for the crowd-pleasing, heart-warming, barnstorming stage musical adored by audiences and critics alike. The Guardian branded it the best British musical since Blood Brothers and "a show worth walking 500 miles for, if not 500 more", in reference to The Proclaimers' iconic hit.

Although they gave their blessing to Sunshine on Leith, Craig and Charlie Reid had no creative input into the musical itself. When they found a window in their hectic touring schedule eventually to go to see it, they admit to feeling blown away by the experience. "I thought it was fantastic," recalls Charlie. "It was quite surreal and moving listening to your own stuff sung back at you by actors. You could feel the tears rolling down a few times."

"I think the secret is that Stephen really listened to the lyrics," adds Craig. "He told the story through not just what he felt about what the lyrics said, but something beyond that. He's an artist himself. What he's done is magical."

## MacMamma Mia

The Proclaimers have always told stories with their songs, which is what makes them ideally suited to a musical. It didn't take the media to dub *Sunshine on Leith* 'MacMamma Mia' for others to spot its filmic potential, among them Glasgow-based producer Arabella Page Croft, who runs Black Camel Pictures with her husband Kieran Parker. "The show was very loved in Scotland," she notes. "We faced some competition to get the rights."

Seeking to capture any stage musical's spirit, in particular one that delivers the sense of uplift and joy to audiences that *Sunshine on Leith* does, is an especially daunting challenge. Cinema screens and DVD bargain bins have been littered with the detritus of failed attempts in recent times, because a musical can never just be about catchy tunes, it's got to start with the story and the characters. In this regard, Page Croft wisely recognised that keeping Greenhorn on board was of paramount importance to any successful adaptation, and the writer went through three drafts of a script that moved *Sunshine on Leith* from its heightened theatrical origins into a more naturalistic cinematic universe.

"The biggest task was taking those characters and putting them in a recognisable world for a film audience," explains Greenhorn. "It was about making the leap into a gritty, dirt-under-the-fingernails experience of life, Leith and Edinburgh."

As much as she was able to move the script forward in terms of storytelling and financing, however, Page Croft still couldn't help wondering at times "how I was going to sell this funny, idiosyncratic Scottish musical that means so much to all of us to the rest of the world". Enter Andrew Macdonald and Allon Reich of DNA Films, producers of some of the most acclaimed British films of recent years, including *28 Days Later*, *The Last King Of Scotland* and *Never Let Me Go*. DNA delivered the rocket-fuel injection *Sunshine on Leith* needed. "It felt like we were catching that wave again for a second time," observes Greenhorn.

Like Page Croft, Macdonald had also been alerted to the stage show by a friend and when he found out that she owned the rights and was already developing a script, he quickly got in touch. "She sent me the script and it had what I was looking for, which was heart," says Glasgow-born Macdonald, adding: "I've always wanted to do a musical; the fact that it was from Scotland made it all the more appealing."



## Another early sceptic

Not everyone in Macdonald's circle was as smitten as he was by the notion of a Scottish musical featuring music by The Proclaimers. "That includes my wife!" he laughs. His DNA Films partner was another early sceptic.

"I thought it was going to be the story of fantastic twin musicians making it on the Scottish music scene, which sounded a little bit niche," admits Reich. "But when I read the script, I was completely captivated by the story and the characters. The second time I read it, I had my web browser open to YouTube and played all the tracks at the point they came in the story. It was so seamless that I thought The Proclaimers must have written some of the songs specifically for the musical. I was amazed to discover that Stephen had woven it all together from pre-existing tracks."

DNA approached their first foray into musicals with serious intent. In particular, Macdonald was keen that the narrative, despite embracing universal themes, be anchored as locally as possible in its Leith setting. He asked Greenhorn to do another draft, taking out any elements that had been added in to appeal to an international audience. For instance, rather than support Scotland's national football team, the characters are now passionate supporters of Leith's local club, Hibernian FC (aka 'Hibs').

"When you look at films like *The Full Monty* and *Four Weddings*, they are very specific to their social and geographical setting," explains Macdonald. "I'd had a lot of success with that, too, with *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*, which were both set in Scotland. I knew that was important to do."

## Every tune had to earn its place

Also imperative was a streamlining process that saw the number of songs reduced from 20 down to 13. "I did feel very sentimental about losing some of the songs," Page Croft admits. "But it needed the tough love that DNA gave to it. They made some very sensible decisions." While the musical spine of the stage show has survived largely intact for the film, each song underwent a rigorous test about the structural role it played in the emotional arc and momentum of the story. No space for hangers-on, however beautiful or melodic. Every tune had to earn its place.

"There wasn't a huge amount of to-ing and fro-ing about the story or the characterisation," says Greenhorn. "All the big arguments were about whether a certain song should stay or go. People get so attached to their favourites." The survivors making up *Sunshine on Leith*'s final track list are: *Sky Takes The Soul*, *I'm On My Way*, *Over And Done With*, *Misty Blue*, *Make My Heart Fly*, *Let's Get Married*, *Oh Jean*, *Hate My Love*, *Then I Met You*, *Should Have Been Loved*, *Sunshine on Leith*, *Letter From America*, and *I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)*.

"This film covers big themes: family, love, relationships, bereavement," says MacDonald. "But it's also full of humour and joy. It has a very big heart."

"For all its downbeat moments, it's an upbeat story," concludes Reich. "We want people dancing out of the cinemas."

Make sure to share this first-rate musical with friends and loved ones, it's one of those films you can share unashamedly and one you definitely should!

Read more about *Sunshine on Leith* and other new films opening this week at [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za).

## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

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