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# Marc Ellington, American folk singer who became the laird of a Scottish estate – obituary

He worked with Fairport Convention and restored Towie Barclay Castle in Aberdeenshire, becoming a pillar of the Scottish Establishment

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Marc Ellington in his folk days | CREDIT: Estate Of Keith Morris/Redferns

Marc Ellington, who has died aged 75, was an American folk rock musician and Vietnam draft evader who became one of Scotland's leading building conservationists through his restoration of the derelict Towie Barclay Castle.

He was a man of warmth and generosity, and his journey from hippiedom to the heart of the Scottish Establishment as Deputy Lieutenant of Aberdeenshire was completely unforced.

He was as at home with Prince Charles as he was recording with Fairport Convention or holidaying with [David Bowie](#) – whose singing, Ellington's insouciant young daughters remarked, "wasn't very good".

Ellington made a success of his music without becoming a household name. As a singer/songwriter and guitarist, he made his first recordings in London in 1968, and five albums and eight more singles followed by 1975.

But his forte was making music in the company of others. Playing everything from the bagpipes to finger cymbals, and providing vocal support on albums like Fairport Convention's *Unhalfbricking*, he recorded or jammed with the greats of his genre – the Byrds, Matthews Southern Comfort, the Flying Burrito Brothers. Bob Dylan and Bob Marley were friends.

Ellington was closest to Fairport Convention, and played with Sandy Denny, Simon Nicol and Richard Thompson when each went solo. He appeared on stage with the Convention at their annual Cropredy Festival near Banbury, and two years ago joined in Thompson's 70th-birthday concert at the Royal Albert Hall.

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Ellington in front of Towie Barclay Castle

His involvement with Towie Barclay, a mid-16th century tower house near Turriff, began when Ellington was in his mid-20s. His wife Karen recalled that they “searched all over Scotland to find a castle ruin to buy and restore” before being offered Towie Barclay for a few thousand pounds – beginning a half-century “labour of love”.

“It hadn’t been lived in for 200 years,” Ellington recalled in 2017. “It was nothing but a ruin when we started work in 1969. There was ivy everywhere, but we had a vision and we’ve stayed true to it.

“We were unlucky not to have pictures and plans of what the castle used to be like. We tried to conserve and restore the features of the original building, and although we made alterations for contemporary living we kept that side to a minimum.”

The seven-year project was financed by Ellington’s music, and overseen by his wife, who became an award-winning landscaper and garden designer. The quality of their restoration was acknowledged with Saltire, European Architectural Heritage and Civic Trust awards.



Ellington sings We Shall Overcome as Vanessa Redgrave delivers a petition to Downing Street on behalf of the CND in 1968 | CREDIT: The Telegraph

Ellington recalled that when they started, “the craftsmen, the masons, roofers, old-school plumbers that we needed to do the job were mostly retiring or already retired. Another 10 years and those skills would have disappeared.” In 2013 he set up the Scottish Traditional Skills Training Centre to perpetuate them, taking charge himself.

A superb networker, he was credited with having engineered the transfer of Aberdeen University’s highly regarded trauma unit to the city’s other university – Robert Gordon’s – when its future was in doubt. (The Robert Gordon’s foundation had in 1792 bought Towie Barclay for £21,000 from a spooked Earl of Findlater in a previous attempt to secure its future.)



Ellington's self-titled 1969 album

Ellington was a keen and hospitable yachtsman, keeping a gaff-rigged ketch at Whitehills on the Moray Firth and

compèring the annual Portsoy Small Boats Festival.

Marc Floyd Ellington was born near Boston, Massachusetts, on December 16 1945, the elder son of Homer Ellington, a radio broadcaster whose family hailed from Aberdeenshire, and the former Harriet Kellas, a speech therapist. When his father interviewed Duke Ellington, the black jazzman jokingly called him “Cuz”.

In 1967, with the Vietnam War at its height, the Ellingtons moved to Britain with their boys, leaving their daughter behind. Ellington, then 21, attracted publicity as “the first American to refuse his draft call publicly in Great Britain” when he handed his US Army draft papers to CND’s Canon John Collins.



Marc Ellington, in his capacity as founder of the Scottish Traditional Skills Training Centre, with JK Rowling and Prince Charles in 2010 | CREDIT: Danny Lawson/PA

Ellington had begun his musical career with a folk group in Oregon, and was soon recording in London – dedicating an early track to the National Trust for Scotland. He went on to host a show on Grampian Television: *Marc Time*, featuring friends including Gallagher and Lyle, Sandy Denny and Rab Noakes.

Taking British citizenship in 1979, he developed a wider portfolio of interests, styling himself a communications and heritage consultant, composer and recording artiste and producer of films and television documentaries. He took a particular interest in promoting tourism in Scotland, chairing the Grampian Region Tourism Task Force for three decades.

Ellington rejoiced in being Baron of Towie Barclay, and with his wife took over the lairdship of the villages of Gardenstown and Crovie. In 2015 he had a cairn erected to the men from the area who lost their lives in the First World War; the Prince of Wales inaugurated it.

He was the chairman of Heritage Press (Scotland), and at various times vice-president of the Buchan Heritage Society; a member of the Heritage Lottery Fund Committee for Scotland, the Historic Buildings Council, Grampian Enterprise and the British Heritage Committee; a board member of Aberdeen University Research and Banff & Buchan College; a non-executive director of Historic Scotland; and a Trustee of the National Galleries of Scotland.

Ellington was appointed Deputy Lieutenant in 1984, and an Officer of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in 2004. He was an honorary Fellow of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, and in 2015 received an honorary doctorate from Aberdeen University.

Marc Ellington married Karen Streater in 1967. She survives him, with their two daughters and four grandsons.

**Marc Ellington, born December 16 1945, died February 17 2021**

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