Of all the artists living on the Isle of Harris, there are perhaps few who can equal the contribution made to the success and survival of their craft than Donald John Mackay, the master weaver who, through an historic deal with Nike, was able to rejuvenate an entire industry and change forever the way we look at Harris Tweed. I met with Donald John at his home and workshop overlooking the majestic sands of Luskentyre beach to discuss his inspiration, his craft, and the unlikely path that has taken him from the blackhouse village of his childhood to the catwalks of London, New York and Japan.

It would be almost impossible to separate Donald John’s story from the story of Harris Tweed. In many ways, the tradition was ready and waiting for him. Donald John’s father was a weaver, and before that his grandmother, too. From a young age he and his brothers were immersed in the sights and sounds of Harris Tweed production which were present all around the blackhouse village where they spent their early childhood. The sound of his father working at the loom, deafening to him as a child, is one of Donald John’s earliest memories. When I ask if he felt that he was always going to continue the family tradition and become a weaver, Donald John replies:

‘That isn’t really the way that it came about for me. Back then weaving wasn’t a case of only shearing sheep and sitting at a loom preparing yarn, it was far more of a community and family orientated thing, and everybody was involved. Of course we as children had to do our bit. There were six boys in the family, and I’m quite sure that we could all weave by the time each of us turned thirteen, although I was the only one of the six brothers to carry it on.’

Donald John’s instruction in the processes of weaving and producing Harris Tweed came about as a result of helping his father. I ask him if his father was responsible for training him in those early years:

‘I wouldn’t say that my father trained us, exactly. It was more the fact that we were observing him and absorbing it all the time. Even when we weren’t watching him you could hear the evidence everywhere of all the different forms of production. The shearing of the sheep, the dyeing of the wool, people going out to collect the lichens and heathers we used for the dyes. This was in the sixties, and tweed then was something that involved everybody in the village.’

While he looks back with fond memories on the village of his childhood, Donald John tells me that the importance of Harris Tweed production and its influence on community life was something that should have been appreciated more during the steady, successful years of the nineteen sixties:

‘At that time in the sixties it was the backbone of the island’s economy. Until recently that wasn’t the case, but back then it certainly was, and there were several generations of families who were dependent on the proceeds of the Harris Tweed industry. It was incredibly important, so much so that I don’t think it was as fully appreciated as it could have been by the locals who were involved in it. It was taken for granted, which it shouldn’t have been, because it’s far too special for that. It’s really been the lifeblood for the island way of life.’

In the weeks before Donald John was supposed to leave school, a death in the family caused him to relocate from Leverburgh to Luskentyre. His Auntie’s husband passed away, and since they didn’t have a family of their own it was decided that Donald John should go to stay with her and help her
out. At this point he was close to turning sixteen and had to start thinking about getting himself a job:

‘From what I’d learned watching my father and growing up in the village, I was already able to weave many of the basic tweed varieties, and so I knew there would be a good chance of me getting a job with one of the mills in Stornoway.’

In support of this decision, Donald John’s auntie provided him with his first loom, a single weave Hattersley loom purchased second-hand from the Isle of Skye. Despite not setting out with an overwhelming ambition to become a weaver, it seemed the most viable option that would allow him to provide for himself and help his family:

‘I don’t know if it was a choice of something I really wanted to do, it was more a way that would enable me to stay and live here (Luskentyre), working on the croft and weaving around the croft work.’

Nevertheless, it appeared that Donald John’s relationship with Harris Tweed had already been set in motion. Over the course of several decades he was witness to many changes in the industry, including a shift in the type of wool that was being used in production. Harris Tweed had been traditionally sourced from the Blackface species of sheep. The wool from these sheep was thicker and coarser, which resulted in a very durable, though not particularly comfortable fabric. As a market started to appear for softer fabrics, wool from Cheviot sheep was gradually introduced into production until in the nineteen sixties Harris Tweed contained an equal blend of these two types of wool. Since the nineteen seventies, Cheviot wool has become the preferred source and now dominates over the Blackface.

In addition to a change in materials, Donald John was also personally affected by the peaks and troughs experienced by the Harris Tweed industry:

‘There was a definite rise and fall, and while that was true for all the companies involved in the textile industry, it was felt more here because so many islanders were dependent upon Harris Tweed for income and work. There were peaks and troughs all the time. When it was down, all the available work was portioned off to the people who needed it most; those with large families and the like. It was the fairest way of distributing the work, though it meant that for me, being single at the time, I might only get by on one or two pieces of tweed a week to work on.’

‘Eventually the industry was in such a recession that I’d only be issued maybe one tweed every six weeks or so and for that I’d only be paid about a hundred pounds. It was barely enough to live on. I was also working on renovating my Auntie’s house and I had the sheep and the croft work to look after, but even then there wasn’t enough money coming in.’

As a result, Donald John started working for a coal yard based in Tarbert. While it provided him with an income, the amount of work that the job entailed prevented him from being able to spend anytime weaving. Determined to get back into the industry, Donald John knew that the only way he would be able to weave again would be to start working for himself. After several attempts at securing funding from the government to set up his own business, he was able to start The Luskentyre Harris Tweed Company with his wife Maureen in nineteen ninety one, initially by making and selling tartan tweeds, something which nobody else was producing at the time.
Despite their initial elation at being able to operate as their own company, the couple would continue to struggle for another eight years as Harris Tweed showed no signs of gaining popularity.

‘The peaks and troughs through the years have always been a part of the history of weavers here,’ says Donald John. ‘Since we were weaving independently for our own company, and not for the mills, we had been in such a prolonged period of downturn that at one point just before the millennium we were thinking about shutting up shop, even though we perhaps didn’t have that option. Nobody wanted tweed, and those that did weren’t wanting enough to keep us in business and in employment.’

However, in the early days of the new millennium, things began to change for the better. A Japanese textile company contacted Derek Murray, the owner of the Shawbost and Stornoway mills, to express an interest in Harris Tweed. Murray advised them to get in touch with Maureen to arrange a visit to Luskentyre to see Donald John at his loom. The next day, three representatives from the company got out of a taxi outside Donald John’s house and left the same afternoon with an order for 25 metres of tweed to be woven and sent to Japan. This initial amount quickly increased to 250 metres, a huge contract that sparked a crucial change in fortune for Donald John and Maureen.

‘After that, the phone started ringing. And I suppose you could say it hasn’t stopped since. That contract came at a crucial time for us, as I’ve said we were on the verge of closing down just a few years before. It was a bad time for everybody, but we were really hanging on by the skin of our teeth. That was the turning point for us.’

In 2003 Nike got in touch with Maureen via email to say that they were thinking of making their own design of Harris Tweed, with a minimum amount of 25 metres being required.

‘They contacted us with a print-out of the design they had in mind to see if I could do anything with it, which I could. They then asked for samples of the yarn I would be using, along with six samples of our best-selling tweeds to be sent to their company headquarters in Oregon. As it turned out, Nike told us they intended to use the tweed to revolutionise the design of the Terminator series of women’s basketball trainers, with five ten-metre samples to be sent to different locations in the US and China.’

Nike’s demand for the fabric increased and soon Donald John and Maureen were sending five 40 metre samples to the company every single month between August and January. Then, in early March 2004, Maureen received an email from Nike asking for 950 metres to completed and sent away in as little as eight weeks. Faced with the sheer size of the order, the couple responded that they would be able to meet Nike’s demands, provided that they were able to take on another employee to share in the workload.

Nike’s response was to apologise for a mistake in the order’s amount: they in fact wanted 9,500 metres, to be completed in the same time frame!

‘We knew that it would be impossible for us to be able to produce such a huge quantity of fabric in such a small space of time. The next day I contacted the Shawbost mill with the details of the order, and at first they didn’t take me seriously. We could hardly believe it ourselves, but I managed to contact Derek Murray who was away in Leeds at the time, and convinced him to help us take on the order, which would escalate to nearly 20,000 metres by the end of the contract.’
‘That was a huge turning point for the industry, not so much in the value of the order, but in terms of the publicity that the deal attracted to Harris Tweed.’

As a result of being included in the deal with Nike, the Shawbost Mill, which had been running on a skeleton crew of employees working a three-day week, instantly went into twenty-four hour production, creating fulltime work for fifty weavers and countless other workers assisting in the dyeing and preparation of the wool. This unprecedented boost to the industry was also aided by a change in the public perception of brand, and a chance for the Harris Tweed emblem to appear alongside the famous ‘tick’.

One of the conditions that Donald John and Maureen placed upon the contract with Nike was that the Harris Tweed logo had to appear on the shoe. The company obliged, but tucked the Harris Tweed logo on the inside of the shoe, meaning that anyone unfamiliar with the brand would think that Nike had created the fabric themselves. On discovering this, Maureen immediately contacted Nike to demand a change in the design. In 2010, Nike placed another order, but this time they sent a prototype with the Harris Tweed emblem showing prominently on the tongue of the shoe.

‘That’s more like it,’ we thought, and so we agreed. Two representatives from the company came to see us later wearing the new design of shoe, saying that they had missed out the first time. They hadn’t realised the significance of the label and how much it meant to the people living here.’

Subsequent orders from Clark’s shoes, Nike and Converse would follow between 2005 and 2011, creating more work for Donald John and Maureen and furthering Harris Tweed’s exposure to a new, younger audience. Though long sought-out by tailors, dressmakers and upholsterers for its versatility and singular quality, Harris Tweed had remained something of a well-kept secret in the international market. Now with the publicity gained through the initial contract with Nike, Harris Tweed was able to transform itself from a cottage industry to a fabric that was recognised around the world as being functional, fashionable, and, for perhaps the first time, attractive to a younger consumer bracket.

What may be even more impressive is the fact that all of this has been achieved by Donald John, Maureen and the mills without there being any variation in the traditional techniques used by Donald John’s father and grandmother. In the same way, no synthetic materials were used and all the wool, yarn and dyes were sourced and woven on the Isle of Harris.

As a testament to his dedication and insight, and in appreciation for his services to the industry, Donald John Mackay received an MBE from the Queen at Hollyrood in Edinburgh. In February of this year The Worshipful Company of Weavers also presented Donald John with a medal for his contribution to the preservation of weaving.

‘The experience was extremely gratifying and it was a great honour not only to meet the Queen, but to be awarded a medal from people working in the same industry, that was something really special.’

Inspired by the success of the Luskentyre Harris Tweed Company, Harris Development Ltd launched a weaving programme to train new weavers to use single and double width looms so that the skills and traditions of the craft could be preserved and passed on to a new generation. In his own family, Donald John now has two nephews working on different aspects of Harris Tweed production inside the mills, something which he says he would never have imagined being possible ten years ago.
When I ask Donald John how he feels about the future of Harris Tweed on the island, he says:

‘The future for tweed is bright now. The mills are always pushing the brand, they’ve changed their approach and the results speak for themselves. I’ve got two nephews working in the mill, which I never would have seen happening in the past. Every industry needs new, young blood to keep it going and to keep things fresh. One of the best things that could have happened as a result of our success is the number of young people working in the mills and showing an interest in learning and designing with tweed.’

In the meantime, things show no signs of slowing down in the wake of the Nike contract, and Donald John and Maureen are busy throughout the year with commissions and orders from tailors and designers in a multitude of countries, all of them seeking the unique quality of the Luskentyre Tweed Company’s products:

‘We’re always busy; always busy and always behind,’ laughs Donald John. ‘Because there’s only the two of us here, there’s a limit to the amount we can produce. On top of that we see a lot of interviewers and journalists and people with television cameras, especially in the summer. We don’t sell very much to tourists. Most of what we sell goes to tailors, dressmakers and upholsterers all over the world, including orders to Tasmania, the Himalayas and East Asia. Then we have repeat customers from the UK and Europe and elsewhere who keep coming back to us because we have built up a reputation for consistent quality. They don’t want anyone else.’

The demand is such that Donald John works for up to ten and a half hours every day, whether in his loom shed weaving or in other parts of the process:

‘Even at this time of year, I’m still trying to keep up with completing orders that were placed in the summer. I’m in the loom shed from nine until one, then two till six, and then I go back in the evening between eight and half ten. I enjoy it, I have the radio on and I’m always working at different things, not just weaving; I’ll be warping, washing, dyeing and sourcing new colours. It takes away from the monotonous nature of weaving that I was used to at the mill, and now I’m involved in every aspect of production and design.’

For his inspiration, Donald John incorporates the colours of the landscape from all over the island, from the magnificent, almost Caribbean seascape that he can see from his front window in Luskentyre, to the different shades and textures of the earth, soil, sand and heather throughout the year:

‘We use everything in our environment. It’s all there and it’s always different: you’ll notice that the colour of our heather down here might be a different shade from the heather you see in Stornoway, so we take our inspiration from all over.’

It feels entirely appropriate that Donald John should be the person at the forefront of this new era for Harris Tweed. He was there when the industry was still a vibrant and active force in the community of his childhood, and even through the worst years, when weaving seemed to be on the brink of collapse, he never lost his determination, or his passion for the craft. Having appeared in interviews and programmes for television and radio, and still a source of frequent media attention, I ask Donald John how he feels about being the ‘public face’ of Harris Tweed:
‘We’re doing it for the industry, if it benefits the industry and the people involved in it then that’s fine. We are passionate about tweed; it’s been good to us and on top of that it’s a unique, quality product that should be loved and treasured. It holds a unique place in the culture of the island and in the island’s history. All it needs to keep going is pure, new wool and imaginative people working with it.’