

# THE BUSINESS Herald

A BROADER VIEW OF SCOTTISH BUSINESS

## REELING THEM IN

Why Chic McSherry  
is hooked on Mexico

## THE LAST STRAW?

The shattering effect of  
stress in the workplace



in association with

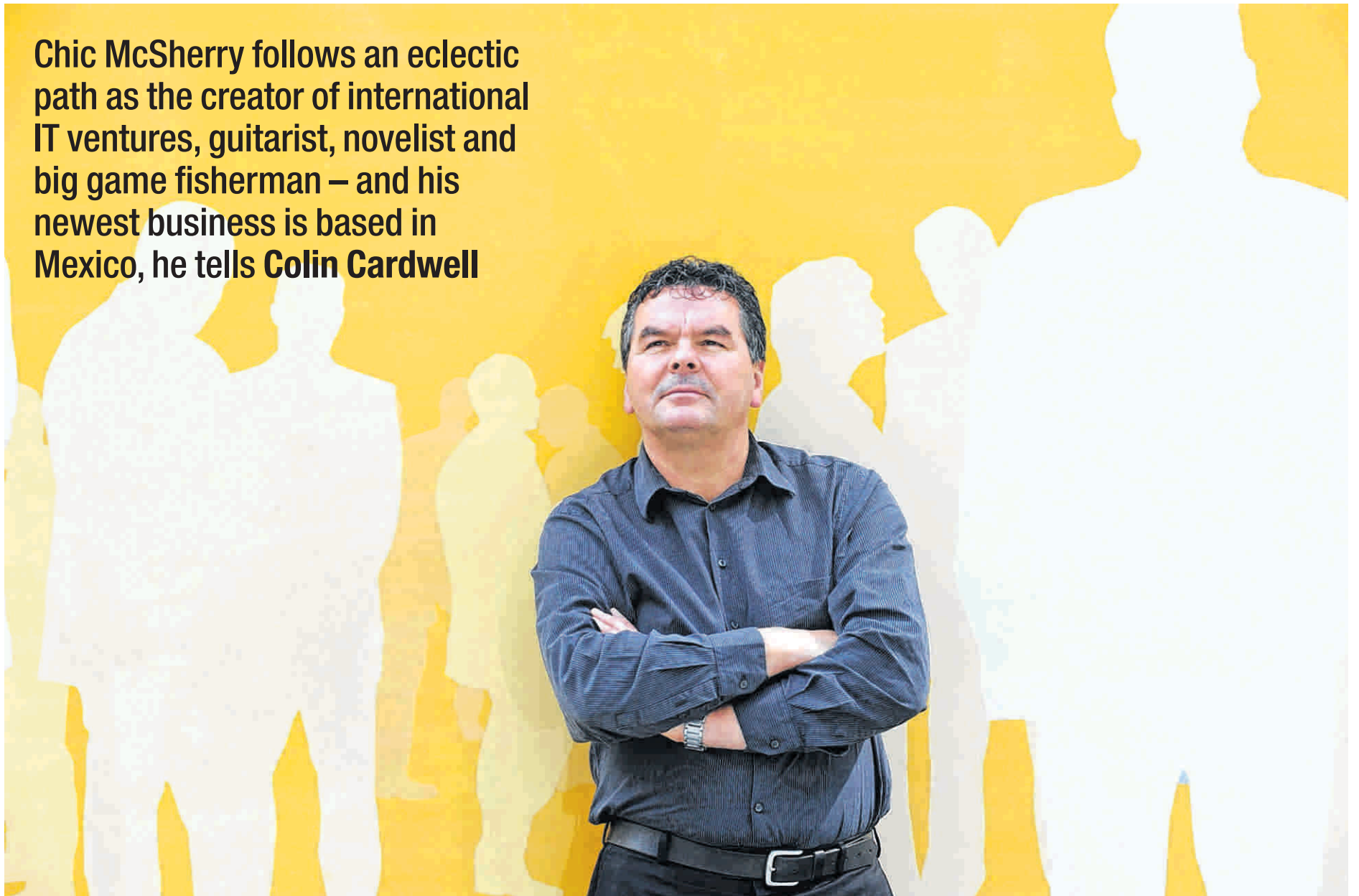
**ACCA**



# Entrepreneur stands

JAMES GALLOWAY

Chic McSherry follows an eclectic path as the creator of international IT ventures, guitarist, novelist and big game fisherman – and his newest business is based in Mexico, he tells Colin Cardwell



**T**HESE are interesting times for Chic McSherry. The serial IT entrepreneur from Glasgow has recently seen the launch of the latest version of his company's Iport Business Platform and a specialist booking business in Cabo San Lucas on Mexico's Baja peninsula. Plus there is the publication of his second novel and the release this month of his band, La Paz's, second album. But more of that later.

McSherry's venture in Mexico came after more than 25 years in the software business. Already established in the US and Canada, Iport Software International has clients in the UK that include West Coast Rail, NHS Health Scotland, Spar and chartered surveyors DM Hall.

The company says that its Iport Business Platform enables businesses in sectors that range from HR systems and purchasing to customer advice and online shop-

ping to use the web in a more integrated way to generate traffic and sales.

It's obviously a lot more complicated than that but as McSherry says: "We handle the jargon and the computerese. We spend a lot of time talking to people, asking them what is going on in their business and how we can increase efficiency – rather than talking about 'platforms' and technology."

That approach succeeded when West Coast Rail selected Iport's software to implement an integration project involving several of its internal systems relating to train time performance and engineering data to improve its customer management functions.

The company is the latest in a series of IT ventures pioneered by McSherry, who left school at 17 and qualified as a metallurgist when Scotland still had a steel industry. He has barely stood still since.

"I started in the IT business as a

commission-only salesman of computer systems, which in those days was mainly hardware.

"Being fearless and probably naïve then, I thought that business people had plenty of time on their hands and that I would have money coming in while playing guitar in a rock band. However, the band folded and the business flew."

That business became Prosys, initially selling account systems and then ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning), including inventory management and manufacturing. The advent of the inter-

net was the game changer though McSherry admits he was initially sceptical about the technology and delivery because of the initial lack of infrastructure.

"At that stage I was more excited about what you could achieve internally, though intranets, and we were running those in our own business back in 1998."

In common with many new-tech companies, it was dealt a blow by the dot.com crash of 2000-2001 but Prosys stayed afloat. It was, he says, always funded organically, from within, with no institutional investors to answer to.

"We were playing the longer game," says McSherry.

"The longer game", "interesting", "fun" and "getting out of the comfort zone" are recurring themes with McSherry, revealing a combination of acumen and focus with an absolute determination to make business – and life – enjoyable.

By the mid 2000s, it was appar-

ent that the company had evolved into three businesses, all doing slightly different things. "It seemed crystal clear to me that software was the more interesting route so we sold the assets of Prosys and kept the Iport part of the business – the business platform and internet software."

In a fortuitous flash of prescience that McSherry says was sparked by "nothing in particular", he put the 'i' in the company moniker long before the arrival of the iPod and iPad.

Amusingly, he recalls, it was a move that once saw him booked to share a speaking platform with the marketing director of Apple. And it was to the US that he was increasingly drawn, frustrated by a grasp of the possibilities of IT there that was not yet mirrored in Scotland.

"I was reading Inc Magazine and other business and IT publications coming out of the US. They were speaking the same language as us

**'WE ASK HOW WE CAN IMPROVE BUSINESS RATHER THAN TALK ABOUT THE TECHNOLOGY'**

# out from the crowd

but when we went into meetings in Scotland people weren't – and the first stage of sales was to educate them. So I thought I'd go to the US and see what happened."

With an existing client in the oil and gas industry whose main operation was in Houston, Texas, McSherry approached the overseas trade and investment agency Scottish Development International and the result was a positive one.

"They were brilliant," says McSherry. "They put us in touch with [support network] Global Scots and helped us with office space so we that could get to work immediately. They got us the start we needed; somewhere we could hang our hat."

In a singularly rare occurrence of bad timing his first trip to the US was caught up in a national – and global – disaster. Incredibly, he arrived on September 10, 2001. "My first meeting in Houston was scheduled for 9/11. That clearly wasn't going to happen," he recalls

wryly. Undaunted, he returned after a year. "This time it stuck. Business there went well and is still generating decent revenues, despite the recession. We've just acquired a major client in North Carolina that will start to open doors beyond the oil and gas sector."

And so to Mexico. McSherry, a keen sports fisherman, was in pursuit of marlin, predatory piscine torpedoes reaching 16 feet in length and capable of more than 60 mph – the heroic, symbolic, opponent in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Though he had caught every other species the striped marlin still eluded him and Cabo San Lucas was the *ne plus ultra* of destinations.

"I went there, asked for a booking and they brought out an old hard-backed diary with scribbles in it. So I said, 'listen, you're taking bookings for 40 boats and this is your system?' I thought we could do something better for them and

we pitched to the owners and developed a booking engine which gave us a whole new market." This in turn led to *icabo.com*, an interactive tourist information resource for the town. For the record, he also caught the striped marlin.

"We are going in the direction of combining the best of Google, TripAdvisor and Facebook with potential in Puerto Vallarta and Cancun. There are also possibilities in Majorca – and there's no reason it couldn't work in Troon; the platform is the same, it's franchisable and it has the potential to be a big one," he says.

McSherry has had the confidence to invest \$500,000 in the venture – "that takes nerve and conviction during a recession" – and is now underpinned by funding by Coralinn, the investment vehicle of Caledonian Alloys co-founder Hugh Stew-

art, which owns 50% of the company.

Recently, after re-establishing contact with old rocker pal Doogie White, former vocalist with Richie Blackmore's Rainbow and currently on a world tour with veteran hard rock outfit the Scorpions, the pair put their band La Paz back together after 20 years. As well as releasing their second album this month, *The Dark and*

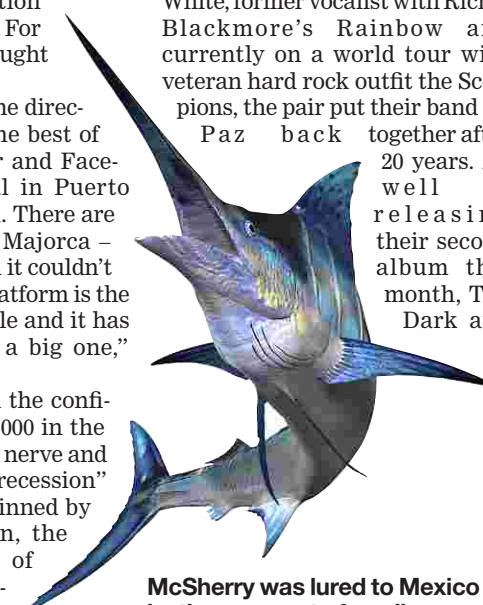
*the Light*, they also play gigs to benefit a children's charity in, naturally, La Paz, Mexico. Plus McSherry's second novel, *Lone Star*, which features a bemused Texan parachuted into Glasgow's gangland, has just been published.

He sounds genuinely taken aback – and delighted. "Here I am, aged nearly 55 and ready to release my second rock album."

And with two sons, aged 18 and 20, he considers it essential to his paternal duty to ensure that they are "well and truly mortified by what I do".

Iport Software now has a team of four in Mexico and there is no doubt that the product there will be put through its paces. McSherry travels to check on progress at least four times a year.

"I often talk about the importance of getting out of my comfort zone; now I'm actually using and relying on my own product – and that's the acid test." ■



McSherry was lured to Mexico by the prospect of marlin

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