



CLANNAD
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Author Unknown

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

Unique is, perhaps, the most overworked word in the vocabulary of your average critical hack. If you can't think of a more meaningful and appropriate description, it does quite well, because it seems to say everything - but, most of the time, really conveys nothing at all. You can be uniquely bad as well as good, though somehow no one ever minds the word being applied to them.

But when all's said and done, Clannad really are unique, because try as I might, I haven't been able to think of a single parallel with their blend of voices and instruments. In folk music, one thinks perhaps of the Chieftains, for they have a similar purity of sound and near-classical approach, but then they are primarily instrumentalists.

Hearing them today, you might think, perhaps, that they had very self-consciously decided to be a group doing mainly Gaelic songs from one particular area, but it was something that just happened naturally.

It's very much a family group, all brothers and sisters and cousins. Gaelic happens to be their first language, and the songs are ones they have heard from their neighbours.

"Gweedore is a strange place," says Ciaran O Braonain, "in the sense that for 50 years most of the music filtered out of the place. Everybody went away, some to Scotland, many to America, most of our fiddlers and pipers and musicians went off because of the very heavy priests in the area. They associated music with evil, drink, and definitely late hours.

"Then, ten years ago, my father bought a pub. You could see the old characters start to come out oven then, but it's only when you know they were in the right mood that they would sing at all. They had to find out that you were really interested, too, before they would sing. It wasn't a very easy thing to got them to do at the start."

At this time, they had no particular idea of taking the songs and arranging them.

"We ware all so happy with just hearing a singer singing a new song without any instruments. We ware delighted to hear it. We had to have that love for the songs to even start looking at them because that's where it all begins. You can treat it in the right way then.

"The only reason we concentrate on those is because they mean so much to us. If you're going to repeat a thing day-in-day-out in concerts, it's got to moan something to you or you won't got the sparkle at all.

"The same way that we choose to sing mainly in Gaelic, because it was our first language at home, rather than something we learned at school."

And to there were these two strands coming together in Clannad's music: the fact that they had contemporary backgrounds, listening to the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, plus this intense love for the music of their own locality. This was more obvious in their earlier albums; for instance, on their very first album they were accompanied by some of Dublin's top jazz musicians.

"They seemed somehow more sympathetic to what we were doing," Ciaran explains, "and of course they could read and we had only limited time in the studio. You could get them to do what you wanted more easily then rock musicians, who ware probably more limited.

"It was the same when i took up playing the double bass. I wanted to get an effect sounding something like a bodhran - it sounds terrible when you say it - but on the electric bass it distorted all over the place. My father had played the acoustic bass in a band years before, so i picked that up.

"I'd been playing it for at least two years before i realized that jazz was the only place where the instrument was played properly. Most folk groups were just Mickey-Mousing with the fingering, so I got books on the bass and learned to play in the jazz style, listening to Mingus, Danny Thompson, people like that. There was a bass player on a Ben Webster record my father had which really impressed me.

With a highly praised live album under its belt, and what amounts to its own record company, Clannad are now planning their next studio album, which may include some more variety in instrumentation, even possibly including a synthesizer.

Says Ciaran:"I still see the angle of some of the Gaelic songs from the point of view of someone who doesn't understand what is going on lyrically, so we will incorporate things to help them, which we are doing even now. There's always been an awful lot of time left during the recording of the three studio albums for experimentation on different tracks," added Ciaran. "We try phasing the voices or something like that, but it has always been taken out of the mix at the end because it wasn't right.

"As long as you know when to use it, and when not to use it, in a very tasteful way, an experiment through the years, then you'll know when you can definitely use something."