



CLANNAD
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SAN FRANCISCO

Clannad: the family that plays together
Traditional Irish music comes to America

Four hippie types and a striking, dark-haired colleen take the stage, grab their double bass, guitar, mandola and harp and begin a stately old folk air. The 600-odd people seated at the United Irish Cultural Center in San Francisco, expecting rowdy Clancy Brothers-style drinking songs and jigs, are slightly dumbfounded. But Clannad - one of the most popular traditional Irish bands in their native country and Europe -are different from their fellow folk groups. They sing almost entirely in Gaelic. They use the harp (played by Máire Ní Braonáin, the lead singer), tin whistle and flute (played by Pól Ó Braonáin) instead of the more commonly used fiddle and uilleann (pronounced woolen) pipes. And unlike such top Irish groups as the Bothy Band and Planxty, they don't disband every six months.

Clannad (the name means the Clan from Dore) stay together because they are family -literally. Ciarán o Braonáin, 25 (the group's leader, double bassist and guitarist), Pól, 23, and Máire, 27 (pronounced moya), are brothers and sister; mandolinist Padraig Ó Dúgain and guitarist Noel Ó Dúgain are their thirty-year-old twin uncles. All five grew up in two

adjoining houses in Gweedore, a Gaelic-speaking parish of about 6000 in the wild, mountainous, Northwest county of Donegal. Gaelic is their native language (the Ó Braonáins' father, Leo, who spoke only English until a few years ago, is referred to by Ciarán as an "outsider" because he comes from Sligo, a county south of Donegal).

Leo Ó Braonáin ran a big band in the fifties - "the Glen Millertype thing," said Ciarán at his beach-front motel room the afternoon before Clannad's maiden American concert at the cultural center. The Ó Braonáin and Ó Dugain children grew up listening to Mrs. Ni Braonáin's Gaelic ballads (she was a music teacher in Gweedore) and the hodgepodge of music that Leo's friends brought to both their home and Leo's tavern, the pub the elder Ó Braonáin started when he left his band. But by the time they were teenagers, Ciarán and company had abandoned other styles for the folk music of their area. "We were playing all kinds of music," said Ciarán. "But we finally said, "There's no use playing other people's music, because there's so much great fiddle music, traditional music, right here.

Ciarán took up the bass ("It was one of the instruments in the show band, and I remember just picking it up"); Pól, Noel and Padraig learned such stringed instruments as the mandolin, mandola and guitar, and in 1970 they entered and won the all-Irish Gael Linn, Slogadh competition and the Letterkenny Folk Festival. The latter victory included a Polydor recording contract, but Polydor, according to Ciarán, was not quite ready for Clannad. "We brought in demos of our Gaelic songs when we were going to sign the contract.

The general manager and salesman shat bricks. "Jesus Christ! That won't sell.' That was the attitude in those days. But we were serious -it wasn't funny talk"

Though the band was gaining attention, it decided not to bring in traditional lead instruments if it meant going outside the clan. "I think if there were pipes, if there were fiddles in the family, we'd be playing those instruments," said Ciarán. "The fact is, we needed a lead instrument. So we just grabbed my sister, Máire, who was learning the harp at college in Sligo. Pól had started to play tin whistle and flute. So the harp and flute were up front."

Clannad toured sporadically as amateurs until 1975, when engineer Nicky Ryan and journalist Fachtna O'Kelly (now manager of the Boomtown Rats)

decided the group was destined for bigger things. "After working with Planxty as an engineer in 1975, I was at loose ends," said Nicky at the sound check for the San Francisco show. "Fachtna said, "Why don't you give them a listen," and when I heard the double bass and those harmonies, I was just knocked out. But it was a big step for them, a family, to turn professional, leaving no children at home."

"We hadn't that much faith in ourselves," added Ciarán. "But we said, 'Christ, a journalist and an engineer giving up their jobs to manage us. We think we'll go with them.' I don't think we would have gone professional otherwise."

Since 1975, Clannad has moved inexorably to the forefront of traditional Irish music with three albums - Clannad, Clannad II and Clannad on Tour (recorded in Switzerland) - notable for Máire's backwoods contralto, the kind of seamless harmonies only a family can produce and a lush, string-oriented setting for haunting, ancient tunes.

The group has never before played in America (only Ciarán has been here, for a brief stay in New Jersey), and at the United Irish Cultural Center they are clearly nervous ("But we're always nervous," says Ciarán). In addition, the audience, though primarily Irish-American, does not understand Gaelic. Still, after nearly two and a half hours of ballads, songs of courtship and war, and instrumentals featuring Máire's delicate harp, the crowd can't get enough of them. After the show, sixty converts buy the Clannad on Tour LP being sold at the rear of the hall. The group - whose month-and-a-half-long American tour will culminate at New York's Bottom Line in late November - can finally begin to relax.

Clannad has caught on wherever they've gone, despite language barriers, because their music is deeply and evocatively authentic. As Ciarán had said earlier in the day, "We're successful because we stuck from day one to the same thing - we like doing songs from our locality. And if people get off on it, we're just amazed."

From the unofficial Clannad website: www.clannad.org.uk

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