



CLANNAD
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Joe Breen

INTERVIEW WITH PÓL Ó BRAONÁIN

Next month, Clannad, the Donegal traditional music band, travel to the United States for their debut tour there. JOE BREEN talked to one of the group, Pól Ó Braonáin.

He doesn't look much like the average traditional musician, nor does he talk like one, but Pól Ó Braonáin is as committed to Irish traditional music, and in particular material from Ulster and his native Donegal, as any Fleadh-attending, jumper-wearing, pintdrinking son of Erin.

Along with his sister, Máire, his brother, Ciarán, and their uncles, Noel and Pádraig Ó Dúgain, he makes up Clannad, one of the finest bands playing traditional music in Ireland at present with three excellent albums to their credit. From their home in the heart of the Donegal Gaeltacht, Gweedore, the band has quietly but assuredly built up a large following - a fact underlined by their recent sell-out performance at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin.

The name Clannad originates from the Irish word 'clann', meaning family, and the first two letters of the words 'ás Dobhair' meaning 'from Dore' - the

family from Dore. And seldom has a name been so apt, Clannad are a family with their roots planted deep in Gaoth Dobhair, where Pól's father runs a bar. As Pól, who mainly plays flute and guitar, will tell you repeatedly, if the band could stay there and still reach the wider audiences that beckon them they joyfully would.

But Donegal, beautiful as it is, is not exactly the perfect base for a group whose international appeal had been demonstrated many times by their tours throughout Europe. And so now; happily, under the wing of Chieftain's manager, Maurice Cassidy, the band are poised to made an attempt for major honours in the US, where Irish traditional music is currently much in vogue.

However, unlike a lot of other traditional groups who play Irish venues in the States, Clannad will perform in such rock 'n roll havens as the famous Bottom Line in New York, and the El Mocambo in Toronto, where the Rolling Stones recorded a live album a few years ago.

The idea of playing such venues is warm in the heart of Pól Ó Braonáin, whose love of traditional music does not prevent him from appreciating the merits of rock and other musical form. In his soft Donegal accent he will describe with equal fervour the intricacies of a traditional song or the sheer excitement of a Little Feat concert.

His interest in rock is not surprising, for Clannad's arrangements of traditional material are influenced by many contemporary musical forms. Their line of thought appears very similar to Pentangle, the now-disbanded British band who helped take folk music from the pub to the concert hall. The band's work has little in common with the rougher expressions of traditional music. Their music may be delicate, as in "Down By The Sally Gardens" (one of the very few English songs they perform), or strident, as in "Níl Sé Ina Lá", but it is never boisterous or uncontrolled.

As Pól readily testifies, the band works hard at arrangements. He says they can take up to two months to get a song completely right, and that's not taking into account the time spent searching for the song from the local singers. They prefer material from their own area, he says, because "*it is our own Gaelic. It's never come up, singing in another dialect, but if it did, I don't think I would like to do it.*"

This belief in singing in their own tongue is a first principle with the band. When Pól's father was running a dance band his children used to play with him. From there they formed their own group, translating Beach Boy's songs like "Surfin USA" into Gaelic. Their mother had seen to it that they had been well versed in the arts from an early age. *"It was really good. You don't realise when you are young how good it is to have the instruments. After playing Gaelicised pop music for a while we realised the wealth of traditional material around us. So when we said why were we singing Beach Boys' songs when we have these great songs all around us. We were very interested in songs from our area, and we just treated them with whatever came into our heads, so it isn't really traditional what we do with them in the end at all. There are a lot of contemporary influences as well."*

Pól says that when they get the songs they are very raw. *"You can just barely make out the words. You have to listen, listen..... I was going crazy during the summer just listening to these tapes, getting the general air, writing it down and then getting the others to learn it."*

Although he says he loves the recording studio, he feels that it can spoil an artist. *"I don't think anybody is interested in listening to big productions anymore. Things like heavy dubbing cuts your throat. For instance, on the second album, we had drums on it, and when we played in Germany a lot of people came to the gig and said "what's going on, where are the drums?" So why have anybody under the illusion that there are drums?"*

Though they have recorded three albums and played numerous tours abroad, Clannad are hardly the most active band around. *"We've never pushed ever. We were content, most of the time, to sit back and let things happen. Like the band would probably never have become serious except for Fachtna O'Kelly (now the Boomtown Rats manager). I mean, he came down and sat in a corner in my father's bar and worked out details."*

While the support of their family, their own skill and their understanding and merging of contemporary and traditional culture have contributed enormously to their success, Pól is not slow in his praise of Nicky Ryan, their sound man and producer, who is just about the band's sixth member. Nicky is acknowledged as being one of the finest sound engineers, in any country dealing with acoustic acts, as anybody who has ever attended a Clannad concert will testify.

Indeed, he will be one of the band's biggest assets when they tour the States for seven weeks. In this latest venture, probably the most important of their career to date, the band are hopeful but cautious. *“I don't know what to expect over there. I don't think the pressure is on. We'll just go over there and play. If they don't like it, what can we do.....”*

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