



MÁIRE BRENNAN
TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN [MAGAZINE]
march/april 2000 edition

by Camerin Courtney

"Please excuse the creepy crawlies," singer Máire (pronounced moy-a) Brennan says as she clears a couple of her kids' plastic bugs off her dining room table so we can settle in for some craic, the Irish word for good fellowship. Her husky voice melts into warm laughter as she moves the bugs to a side table and pours me a steaming mug of tea.

AS WE SIT, sipping and chatting at her home in a small town outside Dublin, Ireland, I'm hard-pressed to see evidence of Máire's musical success. Pictures drawn by her artists-in-residence—her seven-year-old son, Paul, and nine-year-old daughter, Aisling (pronounced Ashling)—are taped to the walls. Legos lay strewn in her living room. As she hushes the family's yellow Lab, Kayla, and reminds Aisling to practice for today's piano lesson, Máire seems more like your average soccer mom than a Grammy-award-winning recording artist who helped pioneer the modern Celtic music genre.

While 47-year-old Máire Brennan's name and face may not be familiar, you've probably heard her voice. Before the release of her two latest recordings, *Perfect Time* and *Whisper to the Wild Water* (both Word), Máire led her family's band, Clannad—comprised of two of her brothers and their twin uncles—to sales of more than 15 million albums worldwide. Clannad has scored Grammy Awards, top-10 hits on the New Age charts (though being in that category bothers Máire), and songs on the soundtracks of such films as *Last of the Mohicans*, *Patriot Games*, and *Back to Titanic*. Clannad also launched the solo career of New Age music icon, Enya—Máire's sister.

"A lot of people assume I became a Christian in the last few years, just before releasing my last two albums," says Máire. "But I've been a believer for 10 years now. I felt God wanted me in Clannad all those years, stumbling into faith in Jesus, then shining for him in the mainstream music environment, before I released my first Christian recordings."

"Even though I've sung at Franklin Graham and Anne Graham Lotz crusades in Europe over the past couple years, because of the incredible popularity of Celtic culture and music, I've had many unique opportunities to reach spiritual seekers. Since the contemporary Christian music scene is almost nonexistent in Ireland, it's unusual to hear anyone sing onstage about Christian beliefs. But because of my mainstream success, I've been able to sing about Jesus and forgiveness and healing all across Ireland—and beyond."

MÁIRE is standing center stage of an intimate venue in downtown Chicago, smiling shyly as the audience applauds. She's just sung "No Matter Where You Go," her haunting, ethereal ballad from the film, *Last of the Mohicans*.

When the applause dies down, she introduces the next song in her lilting accent. "This next one talks about how easy it is to feel guilty about things in our past. But we can find forgiveness and peace if we turn to God," she says as the six musicians surrounding her on stage launch into a Celtic melody with guitars, flutes, violin, Irish drum, and keyboard. The song is "Where I Stand," which talks about how God never lets us go despite how far we may stray from him.

After the show, a big, burly man dressed in leather approaches Máire. "My friends brought me here because today's my birthday. And I really liked your music," he says. Then he and the diminutive Máire launch into a conversation about music, spirituality, and faith while an eclectic group of fans—including sophisticated urbanites, hug-a-tree types, and tattooed teenagers—gather to talk to Máire next.

"People assume I'm a New Ager because my music's been mistakenly placed in the New Age music category. They'll say to me, 'Oh, you're doing Celtic music. You must be into paganism or druids,' or 'Are you a druid?' They're surprised when I say, 'Actually, I'm a Christian.' When I tell them that Celtic Christianity has been misunderstood and mislabeled as New Age, they want to know more. It's wonderful to be able to bring the message of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ to people who are obviously hungry for depth and meaning in their lives. They're looking for 'spirituality,'

without knowing what that means."

The sometimes-blurry lines between "spirituality" and "Christian" disturbs Máire. "For example, the New Age movement has stolen the word nature. Some Christians are afraid to mention nature because they associate it with nature worship or crystals. Even the image of the rainbow has been stolen by New Agers! But hold on a minute—that's ours! Instead of a symbol of nature worship, it's a symbol of God's promise to us. Our God created nature."

Máire's passion for sharing her faith drives many of her songs, most co-written with her husband of 10 years, Tim Jarvis. She quotes psalms, pleads for God to "Heal this Land," and puts a unique spin on old classic hymns, such as "Be Thou My Vision," sung in her native Gaelic tongue.

One reason Máire believes so many people are drawn to Celtic music is because of its inherently spiritual roots. "While the rest of Europe was in the Dark Ages, Ireland experienced a 'Golden Age,'" Máire explains. "Ten percent of our population went as missionaries to the world. Celtic culture isn't New Age in origin at all—rather, it has a rich Christian history."

THE OLDEST of nine children, Máire grew up in a close-knit family in Donegal—a quaint rural town in County Donegal, on the northwest corner of Ireland—and began singing when she was a young girl. However, when Clannad became popular in the late 1970s, Máire found herself caught up in what she calls the "rock'n'roll lifestyle." "I was traveling the world on concert tours," she says. "I had fame, money, parties. I was drinking and even dabbling in drugs. Outwardly I had everything—but inwardly, I was miserable. In my desperation, I cried out to God for peace and guidance and forgiveness. I returned to church and started reading the Bible again."

While on her spiritual quest, Máire met a man who would challenge her faith and become her life partner. Tim Jarvis was a freelance photographer from London assigned to photograph Clannad for a music magazine in England. During the photoshoot and dinner with the band afterwards, Tim and Máire became smitten with one another. Máire was immediately drawn to Tim's good looks and to the gentlemanly way he treated her and the rest of the band. It was a refreshing change from the self-absorbed personalities she often met in the music industry.

"When we talked about it later, we could both remember exactly what the other was wearing, where the other was sitting, what the other said," Máire says with a girlish grin. When Tim headed back across the sea the next day,

Máire feared she'd never see him again. Tim had other plans. He decided to write Máire, though it took him several weeks and many drafts to get the letter "just right."

"He told me to call him if I was ever in London, that he'd love to meet me. And he told me he thought I was the grandest lady in Ireland," Máire recalls, then adds, "I still have the letter."

But the distance between England and Ireland wasn't their only worry—there was the faith issue. Tim was a Protestant, the son of a missionary; Máire was raised a Catholic. And in the country of Ireland, where even the labels Catholic and Protestant often lead to violence and warfare, it was a big issue.

"We talked a lot about our beliefs," says Máire. "I didn't try to change Tim and he didn't try to change me. We ended up learning a lot about each other during the three years we dated. God used that time to draw us closer to each other—and to him." That, Máire explains, is when she placed her faith in Jesus.

"My parents and my siblings respect my decision because they see the changes it's brought to my life," says Máire. "I used to have a terrible temper and be quite impatient. I always thought I was right and had little appreciation of other people's point of view—which led me to a lot of ranting and shouting. God's really softened my heart. I'm a much more laid-back, peaceful person now. Only he could create that kind of change in me," she says.

This change hasn't gone unnoticed. "My family can see the difference my relationship with Jesus makes, and they're now more open to embracing God themselves. As I see their response, it makes me more and more passionate about uniting the Catholics and Protestants of war-torn Ireland who have been so historically at odds with each other, much as African-Americans and Caucasians were during the days of segregation. We have so much to learn from each other."

MÁIRE is sitting next to Aisling at the piano in their family room, giving her daughter some last-minute pointers for today's piano lesson.

It's no wonder Aisling's musical. "My grandparents were in a band together. My grandmother was a drummer, and my grandfather played the piano," Máire explains. Her mother, Baba, is a music teacher and choir director, and Máire's father, Leo, has been in a show band most of his life. Most of

Máire's eight younger siblings are involved in music in one way or another.

As the piano practice ends, Paul's getting restless. "Mummy," he says with an angelic Irish accent, "Put my song on, will you?" He's talking about "Peacemaker," a song on Máire's most recent album, on which Paul reads the Gaelic version of the "Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi." As his determined, reverential voice fills the room, a shy smile spreads across his face. Paul doesn't just know this prayer in Gaelic, he speaks the language fluently since he and his sister attend Gaelic schools.

While Máire is determined to teach her kids Celtic culture, she's even more passionate about introducing them to Jesus. "Tim and I pray with them, read them Bible stories, and take them with us to a church that stresses the importance of children's spiritual education," she explains.

When Máire talks with or about her two children, her eyes light up. Though she started down the mommy track a little later in life than most women—she had Aisling at 39 and Paul at 41—this role obviously agrees with her.

"The kids are so important to Tim and me," says Máire. "That's why one of us is always here with them." Having a recording studio in their basement helps. Even when Máire's working long hours trying to get an album done, Aisling and Paul can join her for lunch or tea. It also helps that Tim's career as a freelance photographer provides flexibility. However, he's put this job mostly on hold so he can care for the kids, especially when Máire's away on tour. "It was a difficult decision for him not to be going out to work," says Máire. And it's a sacrifice Aisling and Paul don't quite comprehend.

"Aisling came home the other day and said, 'You know, my friend Kara's dad goes to work every day. Every day, Daddy.'" Máire laughs. "She knows Tim's a photographer, that he writes songs and works with me in the studio. But obviously the concept of a dad who leaves every morning for work was new to her. Tim thought it was funny."

As much as Máire and Tim love their kids, they also realize Aisling and Paul can't be their very first priority. "I think it's important not to put your kids before your spouse," says Máire. "If I put Aisling and Paul before Tim, our relationship would suffer. That would put the whole family off kilter. But if I make daily decisions based on the right order—God, Tim, the kids—then everything flows into place correctly."

One of the things Máire and Tim enjoy doing together is serving on their

church's worship team. "It really helps us connect with each other and feel like a part of the community of believers there. Plus, I love that our kids see us on stage praising God together!" says Máire.

"Tim is my best friend," Máire says. "He's the first person I want to tell anything to or to make decisions with. Our relationship is a great example of God's grace, because I definitely didn't do anything to deserve something this good. And I definitely didn't deserve God's forgiveness and love, yet he's freely given it to me through his son, Jesus. That's why I want my children, the people of Ireland, and others around the world to know the peace, joy, and freedom I've found in my relationship with God."

From the unofficial Clannad website: www.clannad.org.uk
SOURCE: christianitytoday.com/tcw/2000/002/2.36.html