

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

The traditional Irish music group has been going strong for over 20 years. Geoff Wallis looks at their success story so far

ALTAN



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How would anyone like to be remembered? Well, in Altan's case the answer's simple – as guitarist Mark Kelly puts it – “honest and true to our inheritance” and the weight and sheer quality of their recordings offers ample proof of this.

For those unfamiliar with its name, Altan is a band which has remained at the very top of the Irish traditional tree since its formation in the 80s and one ever true to its origins in the rugged, but often breathtakingly scenic county of Donegal. Moreover, the band's fame is truly international – they've played for both Bill Clinton and the Japanese royal family and even had German chancellor Gerhard Schröder dancing a jig, sold out the Hollywood Bowl on two occasions, jammed with the Stones and toured from Iceland to

New Zealand, as well as featuring on albums by the likes of Dolly Parton and Stephane Grappelli and the soundtrack to *Good Will Hunting*. In other words, they're a band to be reckoned with and you should make time to reckon with them.

Their recording history effectively began with the release of *Ceol Aduaidh* in 1983 by the singer and fiddler Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh, from Gweedore in Co. Donegal, and the Belfast flute-player Frankie Kennedy (a devotee of Donegal music) who had been earning a shilling playing in Dublin bars while training to be teachers. The accompanists included Fermanagh's Ciarán Curran (in those days playing cittern) and the album not only demonstrated that the Donegal music tradition was alive and kicking, but in astonishingly good hands too.

It was four years, however, before the word 'Altan' was first heard on the music scene. The title of the duo's second album drew its name from a lough adjacent to the Donegal landmark of Errigal mountain. Though again appearing under their own names, the record is generally regarded as the initial Altan recording, not least because Curran (now on *bouzouki*) was there again, but Mark Kelly had joined. Though the latter had first met Ní Mhaonaigh at the 1976 Lorient festival, their friendship had more recently been rekindled by the holding of the Irish music competition, the *Oireachtas*, in Gweedore, and “a fantastic session going on for hours” where his discovery of a musical rapport with Curran remains the bedrock of Altan's melodic journey.

Adding the Dublin-born, but Donegal-rooted fiddler Paul O'Shaughnessy, the

quartet became a fivesome and embarked on both a heavy touring schedule (seemingly unbroken to this day) and a recording career as a band which embraced the well received *Horse with a Heart* and *The Red Crow* whose covers both carried stark prints of paintings by the Belfast-born Ross Wilson.

Towards the end of the 80s another Donegal-born fiddler, Ciarán Tourish began to play with the band, stepping into the shoes of O'Shaughnessy who was finding parenthood and touring incompatible, appropriately making his debut in his home town of Bunclrana. The upshot was the striking *Harvest Storm* replete with all three fiddlers, a wondrous panoply of tunes and the best song selection to date. How does Ní Mhaonaigh pick the latter? Well, singing from "the year dot" in her native Irish and the "attraction of the melody" is a fine summation, the latter producing the gorgeous Rathlin Island wedding song, 'Dónal agus Morag', although her father Proinsias had to come up with his own extra verses for that one.

However, it was 1993's captivating *Island Angel* which fully furnished Altan's stall as a band that, in Ní Mhaonaigh's words, was not just "playing traditional music, but playing it as modern music." Ross Wilson's "stark and bare" cover captured the mood, the arrival of Derry-born guitarist-singer Dáithí Sproule added enrichment while the songs and tunes hummed with the resonance of self-belief. Curran recalls that "everything just worked – we were all playing well at the time" while Ní Mhaonaigh remembers it as a special time, when everyone "was exploring their full potential." Sadly, it was special in other ways too, for Kennedy had earlier been diagnosed with cancer and *Island Angel* was to prove his swansong. It's impossible to imagine a better one.

Kennedy died in 1994, though remains a hugely influential figure in Ireland's musical landscape and is celebrated by a winter school held in his name around each New Year in Gweedore. His wish was for his co-creation to carry on and so Altan did, recruiting long-time friend, accordionist Dermot Byrne (also from Bunclrana) and, shortly afterwards, signing with Virgin for a series of albums which began with 1996's *Blackwater* (which remains notable for having more guests than any other Altan album), followed by the succeeding year's *Runaway Sunday* (the only album to feature a picture of the band on its cover, albeit a very tiny one) and 2000's *Another Sky* before bouncing back with a form-restoring bullet



Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh

on 2002's *The Blue Idol* and the new release, *Local Ground* (a Top of the World review in the Europe section).

BEST ALBUMS

Harvest Storm (Green Linnet, 1992) 1025



The triple-pronged fiddle attack frolics in full-flowing fury while Frankie Kennedy's rendition of the air 'Dobbin's Flowery Vale' is eloquence personified and Ní Mhaonaigh's 'Dónal agus Morag' remains a song classic.

Island Angel (Green Linnet, 1993) 1026



From its pulsating opening set of reels to its closing elegiac title-track, via storming highlands and a telling song selection, this offers extraordinary evidence of a band truly on



the top of its form – and provides a fitting epitaph to the inspirational Frankie Kennedy.

The Blue Idol (Narada, 2002) 1027



A stomping return to the form of *Island Angel* packs a powerful punch throughout, its mood established by the wondrous opening song 'Daily Growing' (featuring Paul Brady) while 'The Low Highland' incorporates vivacious interplay between the two fiddles and Byrne's accordion.

BEST COMPILATIONS

The Best of Altan (Green Linnet, 1997) 1028



Heavily focused on the band's last three Green Linnet releases, special editions also feature the only 'official' live album, recorded in Germany in 1989 when Altan was a five piece and Paul O'Shaughnessy still a member.

BEST AVOIDED

The Best of Altan – The Songs (Virgin, 2003)



An interesting if flawed concept since compiling songs from the Virgin years essentially emasculates them from their finely crafted instrumental context and diminishes their impact, despite the fact that Ní Mhaonaigh is on splendid form throughout.

LIKE ALTAN? THEN TRY...

★ Paul O'Shaughnessy & Harry Bradley

...*Born for Sport* (available from

www.claddaghrecords.com, 2005) 1030

After some years' absence O'Shaughnessy returns to forge a series of powerful duets with the firebrand Belfast flute-player Bradley, including many tunes drawn from the Northern tradition.



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