

The band pictured c1979. Left to right: Donal Lunny; Andy Irvine; Liam O'Flynn; Christy Moore



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PLANXTY

Michael Quinn on the enduring virtuosity of Ireland's very own fab four

Planxty are variously described as "the most influential band in the history of Irish traditional music," "the most groundbreaking Irish folk line-up of all time" and even "one of the great symbols of the cultural reawakening of 1970s Ireland." When the four-piece powerhouse reformed for a second time in 2003, they had much to live up to, not least their own Olympian reputation as the creators of a new sound vividly fusing the separate and distinct strands of Irish traditional, folk and world music.

Rewind more than three decades to the band's formation at the beginning of the 70s, and even at that point expectations were high. If Irish traditional music had lacked a

supergroup to call its own up until that point, Planxty more than stepped up to the mark. When the quartet first played together they were already veterans of the Irish traditional music scene and the British folk circuit. Each was a noted soloist in their own right and all brought a hard-won reputation for fearsome virtuosity to the mix.

Guitarist and bouzouki player Donal Lunny was the most established of the four; a much-respected figure on the Dublin folk scene, he had already tasted fame with the pioneering but short-lived folk modernisers Emmet Spiceland. Andy Irvine, the only Englishman in the otherwise all-Irish line-up, was a multi-instrumentalist and ex-frontman of Irish roots revival heroes Sweeney's Men.

He had turned his back on a promising acting career after a life-changing encounter with the music of Woody Guthrie. Bank employee-turned-musical pugilist Christy Moore brought a reputation for straight-talking, hard-hitting songs delivered in a velvet-clad, honey-centred voice while authenticity was provided by uilleann pipes player extraordinaire Liam O'Flynn.

Planxty first played together as guest soloists on Christy Moore's 1972 breakthrough solo album *Prosperous*. It was an auspicious title. Named after the County Kildare village in which it was recorded, it prepared the way for a band that would revolutionise the way Irish traditional musicians thought of themselves.

1972 was not the best year to launch a new band in Ireland, certainly not one playing traditional music. One of the most brutal years of The Troubles, it was marked by notorious events like Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday, the re-imposition of direct rule from London and the violent deaths of almost 470 people.

But if a large part of Ireland seemed

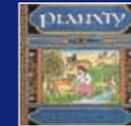
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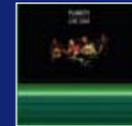
Planxty (Shanachie, 1973)
As first albums go, this borders on the immaculate. A something-for-everyone collection of old and new delivered with jaw-dropping virtuosity. The very definition of *craic!*



Cold Blow and the Rainy Night (Shanachie, 1974)
On paper it shouldn't have worked, but this absorbing collection of material from Louisiana, Bucharest, Manchester and Ireland knits together in a subtle but satisfyingly sinewy way to bypass your ears and inject itself straight into the bloodstream.



The Woman I Loved So Well (Tara, 1980)
Planxty Plus. The original line-up augmented by the Bill 'Riverdance' Whelan on keyboards, fiddle player Tony Linnane, Noel Hill on concertina and Matt Molloy on flute, this is an elegant and timeless display of music making at its most considered and persuasive.



Live 2004 (Sony, 2004)
A contender for the best comeback album ever. Caught live on disc and DVD (reviewed in #28 & 31), here are the fab four at their mature best, reworking back catalogue favourites with consummate and eloquent ease while deftly interpolating new material. A blazing confirmation of greatness.

engulfed in flames, Planxty's impact was no less incendiary. From the off, Planxty were more than just another Irish band. Although traditional instruments – the uilleann pipes, tin whistle and *bodhrán* – were at the very core of the Planxty sound, the addition of exotic instruments from far-flung places and times – the bouzouki, hurdy-gurdy, dulcimer and portative organ among them – imbued the music with what one commentator called "a whirlpool of sound" lending them universal appeal.

Their eponymously titled first album, more familiarly known as *The Black Album*, picked up on (and repeated some of) the elements on Moore's *Prosperous* from the year before, not least the influence of itinerant balladeer John Reilly, whose version of 'Raggle Taggle Gypsy' Planxty bolted on to 'Tabhair Dom Do Lámh' to open the album in attention-grabbing style. An essential part of the live act, it announced the band's ebullient, energetic approach to making music to its widest audience yet.

Their debut material reflected the different but complementary interests of the four. Besides Moore's homage to Reilly, the witty riposte to the British army's recruitment practices, 'Arthur McBride,' perfectly illustrated Andy Irvine's staunch socialist leanings, while Lunny and O'Flynn revelled in two tracks written by the legendary Irish harpist and composer Turlough Carolan.

Carolan proved influential in other ways. It was his self-coined word that Planxty took as its name, the actual meaning unclear but thought to be a derivation of the Irish word *sláinte*, meaning "good health".

A second album, *The Well Below the Valley*, and a third, the troubled-in-the-making but brilliantly executed *Cold Blow and the Rainy Night*, followed within 18 months. *Cold Blow* was Planxty in excelsis, fusing material from the US, Bulgaria and England with native Irish reels and jigs and a new song by Irvine. It was a heady concoction.

Too heady. An intense touring schedule during those years soon took its toll, prompting Lunny's surprise departure,



Left: comeback kids, performing in 2004. Below: Planxty's frontman Christy Moore

quickly followed by Moore and ultimately a complete split in early 1975.

Three years later, the four reformed to heightened anticipation of what was to come, with the *NME* declaring 'The return of Planxty is, in folk circles, roughly akin to a Beatles reunion'.

As before, three albums followed in a four-year period before a second split. With

It's virtually impossible to overstate the part Planxty played in modernising Irish traditional music

Matt Molloy (in his pre-Chieftains days) on flute, *After the Break*, spilling over with the tumultuous release of pent-up energies and ideas concluded with the Bulgarian dance tune 'Smeceno Horo' rattled out in exhausting but crowd-pleasing 9/16 time.

Activities and interests outside the band and, increasingly, the contributions of other musicians, meant the Planxty sound was always in a state of flux. Album number five, 1980's relatively gentle *The Woman I Loved So Well*, offered a more concentrated take on the Planxty sound before *Words & Music* drew the

curtain down for a second time in 1983 on a somewhat flat and disappointing note.

It's virtually impossible to overstate the part Planxty played in modernising Irish traditional music and giving it an international profile. They were the first to show that Irish music could situate itself outside of its own geographical and historical parameters, that it could also be European music, American music, world music. Their legacy is evident in the success of generations of Irish outfits that followed, not least The Bothy Band, Moving Hearts, Altan, Lúnasa and Patrick Street.

Above all, they retain the capacity to surprise. A second reunion tour in late 2004 produced a greatest hits live set and a 27-date tour that led to the airing of the band's first new material in more than two decades and the tantalising promise of more to come. The third age of Planxty, it would seem, has just begun. ●

IF YOU LIKE PLANXTY, TRY... CHRISTY MOORE



The Box Set 1964-2004 (Sony, 2004)
Irish music has

thrown up no more impassioned a vocalist in the past half century than Planxty's own frontman. This comprehensive six-set survey of his finest work throws an illuminating spotlight on the ardent troubadour while also offering useful context for the trials and tribulations of Planxty itself.