

Solas' current line-up (from left to right): Winifred Horan, Seamus Egan, Mairead Phelan, Eamon McElholm and Mick McAuley

Right: All past and present members of the band get together to record the tenth anniversary *Reunion* album
Far right: Winifred Horan, Chico Huff and Eamon McElholm



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SOLAS

Geoff Wallis sheds light on an Irish-American band of spine-tingling musicianship

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Sometimes it seems as if there's just no justice in the musical world. Whether its members were unilaterally cursed at birth or carry some as yet undiscovered indifference gene, there really has to be some reason why Solas are little known beyond the parameters of the Irish-American traditional music scene. Sadly, this lack of recognition denies a band whose collective musicianship and often spine-tingling vocals manage to touch parts that, as a certain brand of lager once bragged, others can't reach.

Taking its name from the Irish word for 'light' (or perhaps more appropriately its synonym 'beacon') Solas formed in 1996 when, somewhat fortuitously, a trio of New York-based musicians found themselves at a coincidental loose end. A native of the city, though with parents from County Wicklow, fiddler and champion step-dancer Winifred Horan had just left the band Cherish The Ladies, while Dublin-born guitarist John Doyle was also on the lookout for a new project. The prodigiously talented Seamus Egan (a dab-hand on flute, banjo, *uilleann* pipes, whistle, mandolin, *bodhrán* and guitar, to name just a few), who'd been born in Philadelphia, but spent several years of his childhood in County Mayo, had released his own debut recording at the age of 14 and subsequently become a key figure on the then rejuvenated Irish music scene in the US.

Performing one night as a duo at Lower Manhattan's renowned Blarney Star, Horan and Egan spotted a young woman in the audience who'd already been recommended to them as a remarkable vocalist. Karan Casey from County Waterford was studying jazz at that time, but also had an extensive repertoire of songs from the Irish tradition. Invited on stage to sing, in Horan's words, the duo found "immediate serendipity" with Casey and, moreover, discovered in the cab home that she was living on the same street!

The final ingredient in the mix was Chicago concertina and accordion whizz John Williams and the new quintet shortly afterwards entered the studio to record an album which, according to Egan, the band "approached as if it would be our only one. We really didn't have a grand plan with what was to follow, so the whole feeling about making the record was loose and fun." Their label, Shanachie, chose Scottish fiddler Johnny Cunningham (who died prematurely in 2003) as its producer, and who proved to be the ideal choice in allowing his charges to "lay it all out," as Horan puts it.

Their self-titled debut album certainly set out Solas' stall and was followed a year later by *Sunny Spells and Scattered Showers* (featuring Casey's gob-smacking rendition of 'The Wind That Shakes the Barley'). But both Horan and Egan reckon it's the band's third album, 1998's *The Words That Remain*, which should feature high on your shopping list. John Williams had left and

been replaced by County Kilkenny's Mick McAuley (on accordion, vocals and low whistles) and the album proved to be Casey's swansong with the band. However, she certainly departed on the highest of notes, providing a gorgeous rendition of Woody Guthrie's 'Pastures of Plenty', while McAuley slotted seamlessly into some of the band's finest instrumental recordings, especially 'The Stride Set' and 'The Waking Up Set'.

Casey's replacement, County Tipperary's Deirdre Scanlan, features strongly on 2000's *The Hour Before Dawn*, but even more so on 2002's *The Edge of Silence*. Egan recalls that "we went outside our comfort level to try and push ourselves. Before this album we were mostly bringing some outside influences to traditional material but with this album we approached things from the opposite end, beginning with contemporary material and bringing our backgrounds to it." And certainly there were tracks featuring him on electric guitar and guests on drum and bass which raised a few eyebrows among traditional purists.

The album not only challenged the band itself – Horan puts that down to its "edgy material" – but perplexed certain fans and critics while leaving others

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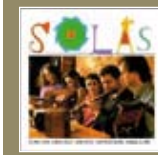
thoroughly enthused. In the shape of the song 'Black Annis', it also introduced the writing talents of Antje Duvekot whose 'Erin,' alongside the traditional 'The Silver Dagger' were two of Scanlan's vocal high spots on 2005's *Waiting for Echo*.

However, 2006 witnessed the band's tenth anniversary album, *Reunion*, which brought together all the band's past and present members for a glorious mélange of musical delights. It remains not only a wonderful celebration of all their individual talents, but also reaffirmed the importance of the band as a collective unit.

So, what can we expect from Solas in the future? When I caught Horan at Dublin Airport en route for the band's 2008 US tour, she enthused about their latest singer (Mairead Phelan from County Kilkenny) and the "intriguing, exciting new material" on the next studio album *For Love and Laughter*. Whatever transpires, there's no question that for the last ten years Solas has provided some of the most magnificent, soul-enhancing music on the planet. The time has come for the band to draw a much warranted wider audience. ●

REVIEW *For Love and Laughter* is reviewed this issue and you can hear an excerpt on the interactive sampler **TOUR** Solas tour the UK in May. See [Songlines website](http://www.songlines.co.uk) for tour dates

**BEST...
...ALBUMS**



Solas (Shanachie, 1996)
The band's spanking debut album really did, in Horan's words, "lay it all out," from Casey's gorgeous opening 'Níl Na Lá', via her other glorious vocals on tracks such as 'The Newry Highwayman' and coruscating instrumental sets which combine energy and virtuosity but never lose sight of subtlety.



The Words That Remain (Shanachie, 1998)
Self-produced and revealing clear comfort in the studio, this was the first Solas album to feature songs from outside the Irish tradition, such as Casey's renditions of Woody Guthrie's 'Pastures of Plenty' and Pete Seeger's 'Song of Choice'. McAuley's arrival also added to the instrumental zest.



The Edge of Silence (Shanachie, 2002)
A demonstrable exit from the comfort zone, the band's fifth album notably employed Neil Dorfman (of Dire Straits and Sting renown) as producer, included versions of songs by Dylan and Nick Drake, as well as the utterly striking 'Black Annis' from the pen of Antje Duvekot.



Reunion (Compass, 2006)
Far better than a flaccid 'Greatest Hits' collection, this live CD/DVD package features all past and present Solas members, as well as their electric accomplices in arms, all gathered together in Philadelphia to celebrate the band's tenth anniversary.

LIKE SOLAS? THEN TRY...

Basically any of the solo recordings of Solas' band members – past and present. But if you're after something different, look out for any of the recent re-releases of the albums recorded by The Bothy Band in the 70s, such as *Out of the Wind*, *Into the Sun*, which set the ultimate template for all future Irish traditional bands.



The trailblazing Bothy Band in 1976