

Gannon, Smith, Blake are a trio in tune

Plumbing the depth of the diaspora

Presenting traditional music and dance of the highest quality, the Washington, D.C., Irish Folk Festival abruptly ended in 2000 and thereby fell one year shy of hitting its silver anniversary. For at least 15 years I was one of the festival emcees: initially at Glen Echo Park in Glen Echo, Md., then at Wolf Trap in Vienna, Va., and finally at the Montgomery County Fairgrounds in Gaithersburg, Md.

Among the countless Irish Folk Festival highlights I witnessed firsthand were button accordionist Joe Derrane's unforgettable 1994 comeback on the button accordion and the 1995 performances of a then-unnamed band comprising Seamus Egan, Karan Casey, John Williams, Winifred Horan, and John Doyle, soon to be called Solas.

Legendary or prominent musicians such as those were the main attractions of the festival, but one of its most laudable and important traditions in tradition was its "Next Generation" showcase for young players of promise. They included fiddlers Brendan Callahan, Jim Eagan, Rosie Shipley, and Pat Mangan, flute and whistle players Matthew and Aaron Olwell, pianist Matt Mulqueen, uilleann piper Eliot Grasso, and button accordionist Dan Gurney.

Two other young musicians of "Next Generation" talent at the Irish Folk Festival were Baltimore resident fiddler Jesse Smith, son of former Cherish the Ladies pianist Donna Long and a pupil of fiddler Brendan Mulvihill, and Dorchester, Mass.-born button accordionist Colm Gannon, who was taught by his Connemara father, John, and brother, Sean. I recall seeing Smith and Gannon perform impressively at the 1995 Irish Folk Festival in Wolf Trap with fiddler Tina Lech and pianist Donna Long.

Three years later, Smith and Gannon immigrated to Ireland, initially settling in Ennis, Clare, where they met John Blake, a gifted guitar, piano, and flute player who had emigrated in 1998 from a different Irish diaspora, London. The musical connection made by the three in Clare has endured, even through years when Smith was a member of Danu, Blake was a member of Teada, and Gannon was a member of "Riverdance."

Ethnomusicologists refer to a "paradox of the periphery," in which immigrant musicians fiercely defend the musical repertoire and style of their homeland against the encroachments of a foreign, sometimes indifferent or even hostile culture. But on "The Ewe with the Crooked Horn," their first, full-fledged album as a trio, Gannon, Smith, and Blake in Ireland proudly plumb the best of the diasporic traditions they were weaned on. That's unusual, and it serves as a splendid reminder that highly accomplished Irish traditional music resists geographic confinement.

As was the case with last year's magnificent "Pride of New York" recording by Joanie Madden, Brian Conway, Billy McComiskey, and Brendan Dolan, "The Ewe with the Crooked Horn" respects the past without becoming enslaved by it.

The opening medley of reels, "McGreevy's (Speed the Plough) / The Silvermines," immediately sets the tone for the entire album. Gannon's accordion, Smith's fiddle, and Blake's piano drive rather than dash, maintaining an ideal tempo full of nimbly integrated embellishments. The trio conjure up a sea of ceili dancers swirling to their music, yet the precision and lift in their playing also suggest a concert performance of vaulting achievement. Finding the elusive, comfortable seam in performance between stage and dance floor is not easy, yet Gannon, Smith, and Blake have done exactly that.

Box and fiddle expertly carry the jig "I'm a Man in Myself Like Oliver's Bull" before the guitar enters for a spirited three-way rendition of "Drimroe Cross."

In the reels "O'Keefe's / Boy on the Hilltop," Blake doubles on flute and piano, with Smith's fiddle shadowing the melodic line. The track is unobtrusive and natural in effect, embodying the CD insert's apt epigram: "Play the music, not the instrument."

The sole solo on the album is Gannon's melodeon playing of the fling "The Four Courts," backed by Blake on piano. At times Gannon's use of triplets recalls the unsurpassed dexterity of fellow Boston accordionist Joe Derrane's triplets.

It's also rewarding to compare Derrane's interpretation of the reel "Give Us Another" on his album of the same title with the interpretation given that reel by Gannon, Smith, and Blake, who follow it flawlessly with "The Stone in the Field."

On an album where all 16 tracks deliver lasting listening



Jesse Smith, John Blake, and Colm Gannon have a new "Ewe."

pleasure, the medley of the jigs "Strike the Gay Harp / My Former Wife" is the longest in duration (4:29) and the most irresistible. Accordion, fiddle, and piano seem to take wing, rising to a level of freedom, confidence, and control held in perfect equilibrium. It is a goose-flesh-raising performance by the trio.

The blend of box, fiddle, flute, piano, and guitar from these three musicians beautifully evokes their mentors, past masters, and past recordings. Because the melodies are principally played by Gannon and Smith, the album is redolent more of an Irish-American than Anglo-Irish traditional sound.

However it is labeled, the music on this CD unfailingly provides pure-drop joy bordering on the sublime. Even a few, small, recording studio imperfections seem to strengthen the unstilted impact of the performances.

"The Ewe with the Crooked Horn" is a diasporic diamond, burnished by the exceptional skill and care of three master musicians who should inspire a new "Next Generation" of promising young trad players in and out of Ireland.

This self-issued album (JCB 01) is available at www.smithandgannon.com.

Upcoming events

Slated for June 11-13, the

Worcester Irish Music Festival will feature the Irish traditional quintet Solas. The band will perform at 8 p.m. on June 11 and 6 p.m. on June 12 at the Hibernian Cultural Centre and Fiddlers' Green, 19 Temple St., Worcester, MA 01604. For more information, visit www.worcesteririshmusicfestival.com.

At 7:30 p.m. on June 12, former All-Ireland fiddle champion Sheila Falls-Keohane, who was taught by renowned Clare musician Seamus Connolly, will join guitarist John Brennan, who's performed in the past with button accordionist John Whelan and fiddler Kevin Burke, for a concert sponsored by the Shamrock Traditional Irish Music Society. The concert will take place in Tressler's Barn, 146 Bibbins Rd., Easton, CT 06612. Further info: 203-256-8453, tmquinn@optonline.net, www.shamrockirishmusic.org.

On Father's Day, June 20, from 1 to 10 p.m., Rory Dolan's fifth annual music and barbecue fund-raiser will generate needed funds to defray the travel cost of U.S. qualifiers for the upcoming Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann in Cavan Town. Among the musical guests will be Girsá. Rory Dolan's is at 890 McLean Ave., Yonkers, N.Y. Call 914-776-2924 or 845-735-1204.



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