

JUST WILLIAMS

When Cormac Breatnach and Martin Dunlea arrived in New York in October 2001, they were disappointed but not especially surprised to find that their scheduled show had been cancelled. However, this turned out to be the start-off point for a remarkable adventure, which culminated in a one-off performance at the prestigious Palace Theatre on Broadway with renowned soul diva, **Vanessa Williams**. Words Cormac Breatnach

And so it was when Martin and I were in the wings just about to appear on stage in the prestigious Palace Theatre on Broadway, NY that I heard our names being mentioned by the star of the show. I was very conscious of the fact that months of planning had come to an end, that nothing had gone wrong so far and that it was now time to face the public. As I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, I rehearsed in my mind the few words I wished to share with everyone.

"I can't bring you all to Dublin," said Vanessa finishing her generous introduction, "but I can bring part of Dublin to you. Would you please welcome Cormac Breatnach and Martin Dunlea."

Amid cheers from the audience, some of whom were Irish, we braced ourselves for our performance.

Our guest spot took place for four nights in December, always preceded by Vanessa's warm welcome, and approved by her loyal following with their generous applause.

After performing a few tunes, we were then joined by Vanessa herself, a backing singer and her musical director, Rob Mathes, to perform 'The Holly & The Ivy'. We were a small part of her show, but we were extended the same professional courtesy by everyone involved, including her band (5), backing vocalists (3), brass section (5), string section (8), dancers (2) gospel choir (13) and crew (10).

How did we get to be here? And why us? Our story brings us back to 2001.

Three weeks after 9/11 we arrived in New York to learn that the Blarney Star public house, close to Ground Zero, had been closed down and that our only New York appearance scheduled for October 5 would not now be happening. Don Meade, one-time music columnist with *The Irish Voice*, and organiser of the monthly concerts at the venue was most apologetic. Given the circumstances he needn't have been.

On the morning of October 5 we made our way from where we were staying on the Upper East Side to Fordham University in the Bronx to meet Kathleen Biggins, the presenter of the well-known Saturday weekly music radio programme, *One Hundred Thousand Welcomes* on WFUV Radio. Kathleen has been running her programme of Irish music for more than 15 years and she had kindly accepted my request to be interviewed. If my memory serves me correctly, two or three tracks from *Music For Whistle & Guitar* were broadcast during our interview. I recall quoting from the rebel song, 'The Foggy Dew' (featured on our album) and dedicating it to the brave firemen of New York who risked – and lost – their lives during 9/11. I'd like to think this is what Vanessa heard when driving her kids to ballet lessons the following morning when the interview was broadcast.

She later told her Palace audiences how she had



(l to r) Martin Dunlea, Vanessa Williams and Cormac Breatnach following the broadcast of *Live by Request* on the A&E TV Channel

won the battle with her children that particular morning to choose her preferred radio station which lead her to hearing our music. In any event, Vanessa was so taken with our playing that she stopped her car and phoned Fordham University to get Kathleen's email address. This contact eventually led to our then agent, Sandra Peevers, emailing to tell me that Vanessa Williams wanted to make contact with us.

I then took it from there. Who was Vanessa Williams? I was ignorant of her existence and when I mentioned her name to my nephew he exclaimed, "She's a babe". Well, then, I had to find out more!

Accolades and accomplishments in music, television, Broadway and film; Grammys, Golden Globes, and Academy Awards – you name it, she had it. I was surprised by what I learned about her career to date. The power of music never ceases to amaze me. I found it amazing that our paths crossed that morning, it seemed like destiny.

I was struck by Vanessa's honesty and direct approach – she was adamant that she wanted to record with Martin and I, as soon as she'd sorted out her record deal. We did keep in touch thereafter and I didn't think more of it. That was until Rob Mathes, her music arranger for the album *Silver & Gold*, emailed us to invite us to record two tracks ('Silent Night' and 'The Holly And The Ivy') for that album in London in April, 2004, in Angel Recording Studios.

"I'm very excited to be working with you guys and you have many fans in New York," wrote Vanessa before we arrived in London to record with her.

The recording process was a joy. Rob Mathes is a wonderfully energetic songwriter, musician, composer, arranger and producer. He has worked with, among others, Bono, who performed the Sinatra classic 'That's Life' at the finale of a star-studded tribute show by Musicares during Grammy Week in New York in 2003. Bono later asked Rob and his band, featuring some incredible musicians like Shane Fontayne (guitar), Shawn Pelton (drums), Tom Barney (bass), and Philippe Saisse (keyboards), to play with him and The Edge on two other songs:

'The Hands That Built America' and on Cole Porter's 'Night And Day' which they did on the *Red, Hot And Blue* record.

I wrote to Vanessa following our first meeting to thank her once again for her interest and generosity. She wrote back: "It was a pleasure to actually have a notion come to a reality! Both you and Martin lent exactly what I thought you would to the Christmas CD – a fresh and unique sound that fits perfectly with my approach to music."

Martin and I can attest to the fact that Vanessa has remarkable strength and is a lovely lady, always kind, generous and courteous. She took part in promotional TV breakfast shows and evening events whilst rehearsing for the opening of her Palace Shows. After each performance, she was always the last to leave having signed autographs in her dressing room only to be met at the stage door to sign even more!

As for Rob Mathes, in our view, it was also generous of him to share the arrangement credit equally for 'The Holly & The Ivy' with Martin and I, a gesture which we considered novel and, in my experience, unusual.

Before our return home, we were asked to join Vanessa on the very last program in the successful seven-year TV Series, *Live By Request*, devised by singer Tony Bennett. This transpired on December 10, 2004.

I wrote to her after our TV appearance together. She replied: "I'm so glad to have worked with you both. I love when my dreams become manifested!"

Vanessa has expressed an interest in performing in Ireland in the near future. One hopes that this other dream of hers will be realised and that she will receive an Irish welcome, one befitting an international star and friend of Ireland.

Cormac Breatnach and Martin Dunlea recorded their first duo album together in 2000 entitled, *Music for Whistle & Guitar* (www.cormacbreatnach.com).

See www.vanessawilliamsmusic.com/main.htm for more information.