

A diva comes knocking

Photo © Copyright of
Dunlea/Williams/Breatnach 2004

Trad duo Cormac Breatnach and Martin Dunlea tell Siobhán Long about a chance encounter.

Traditional music has had more than its fair share of doors opened and boundaries bowdlerised in recent years. Tony MacMahon has consorted with San Francisco's Kronos Quartet with startling effect; Steve Cooney has melded aboriginal didgeridoo with west Kerry polkas and slides with barely

a raised eyebrow on either side of the Conor Pass, and Donal Lunny has stretched and bent music to accommodate everything from Japanese Kodo drummers to Bulgarian mazurkas, and sidled back alongside his co-conspirators in Planxty without skipping a heart beat.

Cormac Breatnach and Martin Dunlea, a whistle and guitar duo, have engaged in their own musical acrobatics in recent years, showcasing a brace of original tunes on Music For Whistle & Guitar and treating more established tunes with a refreshing lack of inhibition.

Breatnach's long-time love affair with the subtleties of jazz, aired with Deiseal over the course of two albums in 1993 and 1996 (*The Long, Long Note* and *Sunshine Dance*), alongside his distinctive sinuous flute and whistle style, have readied him for precisely the kind of left field opportunity which recently presented itself to him.

"In October, 2001, Martin and I went to New York," he recounts, smiling at the serendipity of what was to ensue during a short East Coast tour on which most gigs were cancelled following the attacks of 9/11. "One of the things that we did manage to do was a radio interview with Kathleen Biggins on WFUV in Fordham University. Vanessa Williams was driving her kids to ballet and she was listening to the programme. She stopped her car there and then, rang the station and spoke with the producer who subsequently contacted me and told me that she wanted to get in touch. So we ended up in e-mail contact. She bought a bunch of our CDs and then told us that she'd like to record with us."

It's not every day that an Irish traditional music artist is the quarry of a former Miss America - the first black Miss America, to be precise - and r'n'b singer with a voice carved from marshmallow, who has notched up platinum album sales and Broadway appearances.

And like many Irish musicians who find themselves on the receiving end of such calls, Breatnach didn't lose too much sleep. His scepticism was challenged though, last spring, when Williams got back in touch with an offer the duo simply couldn't refuse.



Photo © Copyright Dunlea/Williams/Breatnach 2004

"Two-and-a-half years later," says Breatnach with the smile of someone who's had every cynical bone in his body pummelled by experience, "last April, I got a phone call from Rob Mathes, who's written for Vanessa Williams, with U2, for Bonnie Raitt and many more. He invited us to go to Abbey Road studios in London to record The Holly And The Ivy and Silent Night for Vanessa's album, Silver & Gold."

BREATNACH AND DUNLEA didn't have to be asked twice. But they were in for a further surprise.

"We had worked on the arrangements beforehand, and Rob insisted that we were to go down as co-writers on The Holly And The Ivy," says Breathnach. "That's a very rare occurrence, even here in Ireland. We were extremely surprised at that."

With a co-writing credit on Williams' album, released in the US, Canada, and Japan last October on Lava Records, Breatnach and Dunlea's appetites were almost sated, but not quite. Last December, they joined her for four nights on Broadway, and made an appearance with the entire Williams ensemble on the last TV broadcast of Tony Bennett's Live By Request show. While Breatnach and Dunlea brought American susato whistle and guitar to the mix, they found themselves in the midst of piano, drums, percussion, bass, backing vocalists, dancers, strings and brass sections, and no less than 13 members of a gospel choir, all part of Williams' stage show.

"It was an amazing experience. And the past year has been a very busy time for us. We played at the Prague Book Fair, at a world-music festival in Coimbra, Portugal, and at the second Masters of the Tradition series in Bantry, west Cork. I also co-wrote with Fiachra Trench and recorded a tribute to my father, Deasún, with Fiachra's string arrangement."

Despite the Broadway appearances, the release of Music For Whistle And Guitar, and the Abbey Road recording sessions, neither of the duo work full time in music - Breathnach is a legal costs accountant and Dunlea is a qualified hypnotherapist as well as a music teacher - but the limitations that an alternative career imposes on their music have had a positive impact, insists Breathnach.

"We don't want to do it full time because we feel that we'd lose something in the process. Don't get me wrong though: I am in awe of musicians who work full time, who are under pressure to produce great work all the time. But I'm able to take a step back, so that every time I go away to play, I feel fresh. It's the same for Martin. That's not to say that I wouldn't like to redress the balance a bit, so that I could give the music a bit more time, but that's as far as I would see it going."

WHAT MATTERS MOST, according to Breatnach, is not that Vanessa Williams likes their music, nor is it that they got the chance to marry traditional tunes with full orchestral arrangements, backed by a recording and performance budget that they could only ever dream of. What really matters is that the music gets a chance to breathe free, to draw itself up to its full height, and to sit easily alongside any other music or musician who cares to stop by. That's what artistic freedom is all about, Breatnach insists.

"As you get older, you realise that life doesn't happen the way you expect it will happen. And so you have to be true to yourself as a musician. I do what I want; I play with who I like; and

I try to be true to myself in terms of being creative. I don't have to tow the commercial line and that suits me just fine."

For their second album, Breatnach and Dunlea will bring their music into churches. Their motivation isn't so much ecclesiastical, as a quest to find an atmospheric space in which the music can sit comfortably.

"We have this idea of playing in all kinds of churches," says Breatnach, "because they're venues which we feel would best suit our music. We've invested in mics which would add to the atmosphere, and both Martin and I feel that the time is right to bring the music into that kind of context."

Music for Whistle and Guitar is available at www.cormacbreatnach.com Silver and Gold, by Vanessa Williams, is on Lava Records/Atlantic

© Copyright Irish Times 2005