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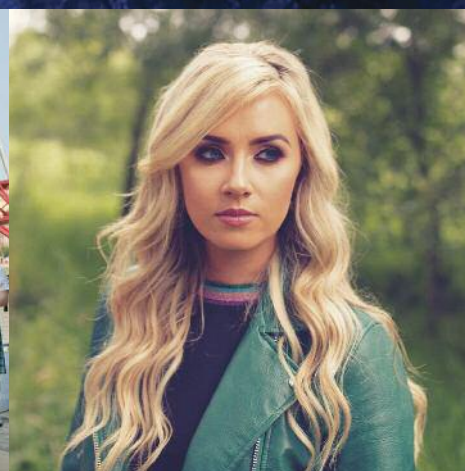
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YOUR GUIDE TO IRISH MUSIC IN IRELAND, EUROPE, BRITAIN, NORTH AMERICA

CROSSBOW ARE ON THE RISE

Seán Laffey talks to Steve Lesko one of the fiddlers and manager with the band CrossBow, a Michigan based outfit, who are blending Celtic music with some classic pop songs.



I began by asking Steve about the origins of the band. “The band started as a five-member group as undergraduate students at Grand Valley State University back in 2011. We initially began as a simple jam session in a dorm basement, and months later we grew to a campus-wide organization. After we all graduated, it was assumed that it would be too difficult to keep the group going outside of the university. We had no idea that, seven years later, we would still be performing regularly together at festivals and pubs across the state of Michigan.”

I wondered did they all come from the same musical background, as might be the case with a campus Trad band in Ireland? “Our musical backgrounds differ quite a bit from each other,” Steve explained, adding, “four of the original members were fiddlers in an extracurricular high school Celtic band, called The Chelsea House Orchestra, which was their inspiration to create CrossBow. Other members played in

them. We do have a few original instrumental tunes in our current set and we will be focusing on that in our next chapter.

“We have what you’d expect in a trad band with fiddles, penny whistle and guitar, but we also have an electric bass, a full drum set and auxiliary world percussion, which all add that little extra element of awesome. In particular, our bass player utilizes a full effects pedal board to create entire soundscapes behind the melodies. However, what really helps us stand out are the visual aspects of our live performances. We love the atmosphere and camaraderie of festivals and we try to embody both of those things onstage. Our shows are packed with energy and movement, we interact with the audience as much as we do with each other, and we continuously play off of those brief connections. For us, the visual entertainment factor is just as important as the musical side.”

Steve brings us up to speed on the band’s latest plans and their new album. “*Ascend* is the most current representation of the band. We

“We feel that we recently hit our stride and found our sound”

genres ranging from heavy metal, jazz, ska, classical, grunge, and musical theatre. While some members had little to no experience with Celtic music, their backgrounds added a unique flavour to our overall sound.”

Steve tells me, “The West side of Michigan has a very strong Celtic culture and particularly embraces the music. Their support definitely played a large role in our success and provided us with lots of opportunities for the future. After we graduated from university, we relocated to the East side of the state, but we still travel back to our wonderful Grand Rapids, where it all began. We’re lucky that we have so many Celtic/Scottish/Irish festivals that allow us to perform all over the state, building connections and relationships wherever we go.”

I asked Steve to consider the balance between original and cover material. “When we started out, we mostly covered traditional Celtic tunes with a lot of them being one hundred percent instrumental. Then we did a cover of Adele’s *Rolling in the Deep* and that began our trend of covering current, popular songs and putting our own Celtic twist on

think it really showcases how we’ve grown as a group and individual musicians from our early days as college students. In the past few years, we feel that we recently hit our stride and found our sound. We’re so excited to share our newest project with the Celtic community and beyond. It was a long process, but we’re thrilled that we have a product that genuinely captures the magic of being part of this band. 2019 is shaping up to be our biggest year yet! Our St. Patrick’s Day tour will take us to the West side with the Michigan Irish Music Festival’s party and Irish on Ionia, and to the East side around Detroit in the cities of Wyandotte and Berkley.

“We’re still locking in our summer tour, but fans can stay up to date on where we’ll be playing by visiting [“xbowmusic.com/shows”](http://xbowmusic.com/shows) or following us on Instagram and Facebook at [@crossbowband](https://www.instagram.com/crossbowband) and [@Crossbowmusic](https://www.facebook.com/Crossbowmusic), respectively. We’ll be revisiting some old favourites and some new venues this year. Finally, we’re beyond excited to be welcoming our newest member of the extended CrossBow family: bandmates Adam and Clare are expecting in July!”

Their influences include Alasdair Fraser and Natalie Haas. The album opens with *Lus na mBanrion*, learned from a Lúnasa recording; here the cello opens the action with a moody prelude before the ensemble shifts into top gear. This approach is repeated on the Celtic numbers, a slow burn beginning, before bursting into flames as the melodies progress. Irish tunes such as *Dick Cosgroves* and *Tuttles* have a raw edge to them, the fiddle is organic and honest, on *Sporting Paddy* we get the un-planed timber of the raw bar, the tune stripped down to its fundamentals.

The Scandinavian material is another kind of fiddling altogether. It has an accent all of its own, even on *Engelska fran Korpo*, which began life as an English country dance. There's much trilling on the fiddle in *Trettondedagsmarschen*, written by Anders Olsson and learned from Alasdair Fraser, the set rounded off with a Shetland tune they had from Natalie Haas.

Then there are American tunes; these are lively, optimistic sunny pieces, such as *Little Mert* named in honour of a cactus is full of choppy mandolin licks. The lads close out the album with a three tune selection of *Salt Spring*, *Le Persuadeur* and the *Highlander's Farewell*. It's fast, furious and full of invention, the old timey mandolin shines and the Quebecois tune is perfect for dancing. A young band looking in three musical directions and the view from each is certainly interesting.

Seán Laffey

CÁRTHACH MAC CRAITH

An Tobar Séimh

All Media M.P.O. ALM17208, 14 Tracks, 57 Minutes

Apart from the fact that one gets great pleasure listening to a new recording, sometimes one gets to learn something new, as well. For example, in the notes by Dr. Stiofán Ó Cadhla that accompany Cárthach Mac Craith's new CD, *An Tobar Séimh*, we learn that one of the first people to record Irish traditional singers was Risteard de Hindeberg in 1905 in County Waterford. And who was he?

He was Rev. Dr Richard Henebry (Risteárd de Hindeberg, 1863–1916) a traditional musician from an Irish-speaking and musical farming family in County Waterford, a Roman Catholic priest, an academic with a doctorate in Celtic studies awarded in Germany, and an early field recorder in Ireland of Irish music on cylinder. When one listens to the singers from the Waterford Gaeltacht on those early recordings, what impresses one is the fact Cárthach, from An Rinn, County Waterford, with his powerful singing voice, is indeed the inheritor of that distinctive sean nós style.

Although this is his first solo album, Cárthach is no stranger in singing circles. He was the original singer with Danú and is a member of the renowned singers Cór Fear na nDéise. Almost all of the fourteen songs on this album are from the Déise area of Waterford and Tipperary and include, *Spailpín a Rún*, *Éamonn a' Chnoic*, *Seán Ó Duibhir a' Chleanna*, and *Mar Mheath Uaim Mo Chairde*.

Cárthach's favourite song on the CD is *Sliabh na mBan* that commemorates the rising that unfolded on Slievenamon mountain in south Tipperary during the 1798 Rebellion. The song is particularly associated with Na Déise area of County Waterford. Cárthach's presentation is very much in keeping with the old-style singing of that area, a style that was exemplified in the singing of the late Nioclás Tóibín of Ring, whose Gael Linn recording of the song made such a stir in the latter half of the 20th century.

Another of the area's great singers who sang that song was Labhrás Dráipéar, a nephew of Cárthach's grandmother, and it was she who stirred his interest in traditional song. Cárthach is accompanied on this CD by Seán Ó Fearghail (fiddle), Caoimhín Ó Fearghail (guitar), Éimear Uí Ghealbháin (harp), Méin Nic Craith (concertina) and Dónal Clancy (guitar).

Aidan O'Hara



OLD MAN FLANAGAN'S GHOST

Far From Shore

Own Label No Cat No, 12 Tracks, 42 Minutes

www.oldmanflanagansghost.com

A Canadian band launched in 2012, Old Man Flanagan's Ghost have accumulated a loyal following both at home and abroad through playing live, and from the commercial and digital media response accorded their recordings. From their first album *Sociable* they have proved themselves one of the bands to watch from over the pond. Now comes their second album *Far from Shore* and it shows how much they have developed and moved musically.

Their front man is songwriter Steve Lamb whose impassioned vocals and socially conscious songs are framed by thoughtful lyricism and raucous balladry by turn. This is an asset most bands of this type struggle to have on board. His finely wrought songs *The Man* and *Hart of Ten* provide strong vehicles for imaginative arrangements as does the winsome *Last Ballad* with its evocative male/female vocals. The band is full blooded on *A Hell of a Party* and the instrumental *Irish Set* with all guns blazing in a sub Pogues/Great Big Sea blast out while *Before they Fall* combines an ecological message of preservation and *Wandering Free* is a freewheeling rollicking Irish Rovers style rouser. Musical dexterity, a sense of humour and increased maturity are the hallmarks embossed on Old Man Flanagan's Ghost and *Far From Shore* has thrills by the bucket load to revel in and enjoy.

John O'Regan

CROSSBOW

Ascend

Own Label, 14 Tracks, 48 Minutes

www.xbowmusic.com

Based in Michigan, USA, CrossBow has been in existence for over seven years, originating when dual fiddlers Steve Lesko and Carly Meloche formed a trio at Grand Valley State University with Clare McMillan. Nurtured and developed at GVSU, the band expanded organically into its current 7-piece line-up, playing traditional Irish music and related genres with a characteristic high energy, where percussion is a key element of the overall sound.

The CD has strong links to the city of Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan and a natural hub for Irish music, and recording was done at Solid Sound Studios. Material is strongly based on well-known Irish traditional tunes, played fast with unison fiddles to the fore, underpinned by electric bass guitar and drums which adds more than a frisson of folk-rock sensibility to the overall sound, without losing the overall roots bedrock.

Tracks such as the opener *Drowsy Beer Dreams* (featuring the Drowsy Maggie reel), *Kiss Of The Green* and *Roscommon/Gravel Walks* set the tone, and you can easily picture these sets being sure-fire winners at a live gig. Musical director Clare McMillan is also an accomplished singer, and is given a chance to shine on *Barton Hollow*, *Ocean Avenue*, and *MacPherson's Lament*, while *Little Talks* works well as a vocal duet with her husband Adam. An undoubted highlight is the title track, written by bassist Mark Pierce, an impressive instrumental showcasing the band's tight ensemble playing, acting as an authentic manifesto for their musical philosophy.

Mark Lysaght

SEOIRSE Ó DOCHARTAIGH

Crimson Moon Gealach Dhearg, Errigal Records SCD025,

15 Tracks, 59 Minutes

www.seoirse.com

Seoirse Ó Dochartaigh, composer, singer, painter and authority on Irish music says of his new CD, *Crimson Moon – Gealach Dhearg*: "Lots of Inishowen in this collection – the sea, the stories, the legends, the history, told in newly-composed songs... with a couple of 'oldies' thrown in for good measure!" He lives in Inishowen, that beautiful peninsula whose location *'Twixt Foyle and Swilly* was used by historian, Harry P. Swan, as the title of one of his books.