

Daithi Sproule Knows How to Make a Guitar Sing: His New CD Features 13 of His Own Tunes

CEOL

By Earle Hitchner

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All longtime Irish traditional music fans have a wish list for reunions, and mine once included Planxty, the Bothy Band, and Skara Brae.

In 2004 the original Planxty lineup of Christy Moore, Liam O'Flynn, Andy Irvine, and Donal Lunny got together again for a dozen concerts.

At Dublin's Vicar Street on May 24, 2007, the Bothy Band reunited, except for one member, singer-guitarist Micheal O Domhnaill. In July 2006 he had died suddenly at age 54, and a monumental tribute concert was held in his honor at Vicar Street that featured Matt Molloy, Paddy Keenan, Kevin Burke, Donal Lunny, and Triona Ni Dhomhnaill performing together again as a one-off, reformed Bothy Band.

Between Christmas and New Year's Eve of 1997 at the Frankie Kennedy Winter School in Dunlewy, Donegal, siblings Micheal, Triona, and Maighread Ni Dhomhnaill and their friend Daithi Sproule reunited as Skara Brae to perform. It had been a quarter-century since the quartet's last concert.

Renowned for their glorious singing and, with Micheal O Domhnaill and Daithi Sproule, deft guitar playing,

Skara Brae originally formed during 1969-70 and released their self-titled debut on the Gael-Linn label in 1971. (Shanachie reissued it stateside on LP in 1983.) The performance that the reunited quartet gave in 1997 in Donegal provided, at long last, the impetus for a 1998 CD reissue on Gael-Linn of "Skara Brae," buttressed by two songs not on the original LP.

But in many critical discussions of such groups as Skara Brae, Bowhand (with fiddler James Kelly and Offaly accordionist Paddy O'Brien), Trian (with fiddler Liz Carroll and accordionist Billy McComiskey), and Altan, the contributions of member Daithi Sproule tend to get short shrift. Even Sproule's fine solo debut in 1995, "A Heart Made of Glass," seemed to draw scant attention.

Also consider Trian's debut album in 1992. The praise heaped on its impressive instrumental playing was deserved, but suffering from a bit of critical neglect were Sproule's exceptional singing and guitar setting of "Captain Thompson." And on "Trian II" in 1995, Sproule tenderly covered "The Death of Queen Jane," a song he wrote the melody for and earlier sang with Skara Brae. Former Skara Brae colleague Micheal O Domhnaill made the song one of his stunning signatures on the Bothy Band's "Afterhours" album, recorded at a Paris concert in June 1978.

Now comes Daithi Sproule's second solo album, "The Crow in the Sun," which spotlights his acoustic guitar playing. That's right: no songs. It is just beautifully understated, expertly executed picking on his 1974 Martin D28 guitar for 11 tracks and on his Dana Bourgeois Ricky Skaggs Signature guitar for the other track. Deja vu gnaws at me when I think that this engaging new Sproule album on Minneapolis's small indie label of New Folk Records may get overlooked too.

Guitar as accompaniment is a commonplace in Irish traditional music, so a solo guitar recording is still somewhat uncommon. Arguably the groundbreaker in Irish traditional solo guitar albums was "McGlynn's Fancy" in 1979 by Arty McGlynn. But he was preceded by several guitarists who wanted more swing in their picking without losing any traditional flavor. In England, Davey Graham, Martin Carthy, Bert Jansch, and John Renbourn experimented with nonstandard tunings, such as DADGAD, while in Scotland and Ireland, Dick Gaughan, Paul Brady, and McGlynn were tacking in a similar direction.

So was Daithi Sproule, again oft-overlooked in this context. He credits Jansch and Renbourn of Pentangle, a band reaching its apogee between 1967 and 1973, as significant guitar influences, especially in the more melodically sympathetic, resonant DADGAD tuning, a way of venturing out from rigid chord positions. But Sproule's style also possesses a graceful fluidity and sensitive shading that turn tunes into taproots of expression and even confession.

On "The Crow in the Sun," he plays three tracks in standard tuning and the rest in DADGAD tuning, and the latter is his choice for "The Lady from York/Angela's Jig." Skara Brae fans will instantly recognize that second, Sproule-written tune from the quartet's 1971 album, where the track, titled "Angela," briefly morphs into a tantalizingly bluesy, note-bending passage showing the guitar chops of O Domhnaill and Sproule. On his new solo CD, Sproule sticks to the stately appeal of the melody through exquisite picking that's subtle rather than subdued.

Another Sproule original melody, "Tune for Mairead and Anna Ni Mhaonaigh," is re-covered from a previous recording, "Liz Carroll," in 1988. There and here, it is a gorgeous composition played eloquently by Sproule, who also lends a

beautiful new interpretation to his tune of "The Crow in the Sun," also recorded by Liz Carroll on her "Lost in the Loop" album in 2000.

"Johnny Seoighe," a traditional song Sproule recorded on the first Trian album, becomes a blues-flecked rumination on guitar here.

The baroque atmosphere of Turlough O'Carolan's "Young Catherine" seamlessly shifts into a comparable classical period setting for "The Red Van," Sproule's own tune, and he infuses "The Humours of Lauderdale/The Roseville," two more of his tunes, with a pulse akin to a midtempo Breton gavotte.

Ry Cooder admirers will enjoy Sproule's pun and playing in "A Shot of Ry," and packing equal appeal are the rest of the originals on the album: "An Teach Ban," "Tourish's Wedding," "David's Guitar," "Taylors Falls," and "The Mistletoe Farmer."

Co-dedicated to Micheal O Domhnaill, "The Crow in the Sun" by Daithi Sproule is, first to last note played, just lovely, intimate guitar playing. The CD (cat. no. NFR0122) is available at www.newfolkrecords.com.

Sproule will be launching his new solo album and teaching DADGAD guitar playing at the Catskills Irish Arts Week this July 13-19. Visit www.east-durham.org/irishartsweek for more information.

