



DAITHÍ'S DAY IN THE SUN

Daithí Sproule in conversation with Bill Margeson on the release of his new album.

I've always liked Daithí Sproule's playing. You know; Altan, Skara Brae, Trian, and now Fingal, his newest group. The Derry City-born guitarist has long appealed to lovers of the music as a highly talented and tasteful accompanist. His newest solo album is a lovely project called 'The Crow in the Sun' after a tune he wrote some time ago.

I'll reckon that if you are a trad fan, you'll recognize it, as you will several others of this 12-cut CD, encompassing 16 pieces, all but two of which are penned by Daithí himself. The album is all-instrumental, and all-solo. "Actually", states Daithí, "there are some relatively new tunes, but a lot of them were written some time ago, and have been there waiting". This is his second solo album, following his 1995 release for Green Linnet, 'A Heart Made of Glass'. I'd never really had the chance for a good talk with the St. Paul-based musician, so I looked forward to the chat for this article with anticipation. I was not disappointed, as you shall read. I caught up with him on one of those God-awful 'spring' weekdays in the middle of April. Chicago calling St. Paul. Grey. Rainy. Cold. After fondly remembering some mutual acquaintances and friends like Manus McGuire and Liz Carroll, I ploughed into the subject at hand. Be warned – I am not going to write objectively here. I am a fan. Have been for years, and this album only furthers my admiration. Now, with that out of the way, on I go.

Daithí first picked up a guitar as a very young fellow in the mid-1960's. The Beatles, Dylan, Joan Baez; the usual 'inspirers', along with a host of others. Remembering those days fondly, Daithí recalls going each summer to an Irish-speaking area of Rannafast, in the west of Donegal, and first hearing real, traditional Irish singing there. Coming from a musical family, it did not take long to captivate him. His interest in the Irish language has never waned, and resulted in his Bachelor's Degree in Celtic Studies and his Masters in Old Irish from University College Dublin. It seems that all of these major figures in Irish music who came out

of the 60's and early 70's shared Dublin as a touchstone, but Daithí's first experiences came out of Derry and Donegal. Daithí's initial, really important professional collaboration was with the late Mícheál Ó Dhomnaill and his sisters, Triona and Maighread Ní Dhomnaill – all members of Skara Brae and with strong roots in Donegal. Their first and only album for Gael-linn was recorded in 1971; it is still a must-have on a lot of trad fans' lists.

Onto Dublin, and a meeting with Seán Ó hÉalaí, now a radio producer for RTE, "a genius at guitar arrangements", according to Daithí. Regular gigs with Mícheál Ó Domhnaill and a host of others at places like Slattery's in Capel Street resulted in a growing list of contacts and a growing series of influences on the young guitarist.

Here comes one of the really important musical parts. Daithí and Mícheál were introduced to DADGAD guitar tuning by the recordings of Bert Jansch and Pentangle in the late 60's. This is a special tuning of the guitar, very different from the common concert tuning. The first 'D' tuning is the sixth, or deepest string, running up the octave to the first string 'D'. It is taken as a basic truism that Daithí and Mícheál were the first to use this tuning in Irish trad. It is now extremely common in Celtic music. All good traditional guitar players can play in a variety of tunings but the favoured is DADGAD. "It has more variety, and is very melodic. It also opens the door to more creativity", explains Daithí. It was in Dublin during this time he met button box legend, Paddy O' Brien, eventually moving to the States and living near Paddy in their much-loved twin cities (Minneapolis – St. Paul) area.

The biography can go on and on. Let's just say that in the mid-80's, through a fortunate recipe of timing, availability and mutual interests, Daithí wound up with Altan as a singer/accompanist. Surely, this super group is the most successful of Daithí's collaborations. But there is so much more. A glance at his web-site's discography shows that he has played and recorded with everybody – everybody. Why start a list? It is endless. A favourite collaboration of a lot of

fans is the work in the two albums he produced with Trian, consisting of himself, Liz Carroll and Billy McComiskey. While I am writing this, I keep jumping back to this amazing discography. What it clearly shows, in a career sense, is a musician who knows his work. The talent is obvious, as is the musicianship, and they are not the same thing. His full calendar is caused by that talent, as well as his taste and instinctual understanding of the role of the accompanist. This is a musician in the truest sense of the word. Daithí Sproule is one of a list of iconic names that came out of the 70's and 80's Irish/folk/trad/ revival scene that swept Ireland and then the States. Now, it has moved onto the entire world. All these musicians and singers – at this level – have built careers based upon taste, friendships and talent. Not bad. You know all the names. Now, there are lots of new players on the scene, but people like Daithí have been fortunate and intelligent enough to build their careers in Irish trad, where age and experience are not

venues were packed! There is so much interest. Musicians and dancers all came out. It was wonderful". Moscow? But, then, a reader of this magazine will know how big Irish music is in Japan, Southeast Asia, Germany – why not Moscow?

And finally, it all filters down to the latest project, 'The Crow in the Sun'. A lovely album, performed slowly, perfectly and with a real depth of feeling. These are, after all, almost all Daithí's own compositions from his years in the music. This is a simple, unadorned presentation of these tunes. No sturm and drang, no fireworks; rather, there is the offering of the melodies. This album joins the terrific, recently released Hayes/Cahill album, 'Welcome Here Again' in presenting the basic beauty of the music itself. Granted, this takes superior and confident musicianship to pull off-, but that is a given. What comes through in both albums is the stunning beauty of the tunes themselves. No over-production. Okay, I've hesitated. I hate the word, but it is pure. The real deal, I, and I am sure you

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discarded, but viewed as hugely important; and they are respected.

The 'Crow in the Sun' is on New Folk Records, and was recorded in Minneapolis. "It was a natural thing to do. I have a friend and producer here who really is wonderful to work with, John Wright. He is a musician and a producer. We had some really easy and creative sessions".

Altan, his solo work, and now, with Fingal (Daithí, fiddler, Randal Bays and James Keane on button box), Daithí is also deeply involved with the Minneapolis Irish music scene, which he proudly describes as, "Better than ever. There are more people playing trad music here, and playing it at a high standard, than I have ever seen".

Next, the conversation moves, of all places, to Moscow. What does Moscow apparently share with Minneapolis, other than drop-dead-in-your-tracks- cold weather? A love of Irish music! True. Daithí just returned from a tour in Russia with button box wizard and good friend, Paddy O'Brien and fiddler, Patrick Ourceau. "The

will be pleasantly surprised, is that some of our personal favourite airs are included, and I had not known previously that they were Daithí's!

A musician earns his or her way to this position in the music. Much is expected. They are respected, emulated and, somewhere right now there is a young musician listening to 'The Crow in the Sun' on a CD player. Really listening, and learning. Kind of like Daithí himself back in Derry in the 60's, Dublin in the 70's, and America since. That's the way the music goes on.

"The most important thing is not the gigs or the CD's but people getting together informally to play for the love of it, no matter what happens on the business side".

And, there in a nutshell is a basic lesson of this career and this musician. As with all the best, it is not about the money, the touring, the 'business. It is about the music and that is what all those iconic figures of the music, like Daithí, share: the music.