

MUSIC ON A LOST RIVER

Dáithí Sproule is interviewed by Bill Margeson on the release of his new album.



I guess there comes a time when, as you get older, things get a little nicer. As a young buck in the music, all writing assignments used to be chased diligently if they were about trad. The last few years when our affable Editor, Seán Laffey calls, there have been a couple occasions when he has received a negative answer to a writing assignment. We have to be careful here. Like the girl who says, “no” too often to the dance invitation, the requests might stop coming. But I explain, sometimes I am not the man for the job.

On the other hand, after doing this for 25 years, we know there are few things more boring or off-putting than having to write an article about an artist whom you do not admire. Dreadful. Luckily, Affable Seán called recently and asked for an article on the wonderful Dáithí Sproule and his new album, *Lost River: Vol. 1*. It is a gem. We did not expect less.

You know Dáithí. When all is said and done, he was one of the two inventors of the almost universally used trad guitar tuning, DADGAD. He has been an iconic fixture in the music for decades. How well we remember his terrific Trían albums with Liz Carroll and Billy McComiskey. Great stuff, altogether. For the past 25 years, he has been one of the two guitarists for the legendary Altan. Is there no award Altan has not won? We often thought that this very magazine should stop asking for its readers to vote in the annual poll for most popular group. Altan is so well-loved, they should simply have retired the trophy years ago. Altan is Altan. The fact is that Dáithí brought his own total musical credibility to the group, and found a way to make these trad idols even better. It is now impossible to imagine Altan without Dáithí. But, here is Dáithí without Altan.

There are 12 songs on the album, all hand-picked and arranged by Dáithí. They range from the up-tempo, yet tragic, *The Unquiet Grave* to a beautiful *Éirigh Suas, A Stóirín*. As if Dáithí does not bring enough depth on his own, he is joined by a tremendous lineup of guest artists on each number, culminating in a great live recording with Altan in concert. The other eleven are in the studio with the likes of Seamus McGuire on fiddle, Minnesota’s local hero Peter Ostroushko, on mandolin, and Tom Schaefer on fiddle. More? How about Liz Carroll on fiddle, Randal Bays on guitar and fiddle and Billy McComiskey on accordion with a bit of step dancing by Danielle Enblom? More! Laura MacKenzie with a lovely bit on whistle, John Wright on bass, and the usual brilliant turn by Dean Magraw on guitar. Still more—we’re getting to the end here—how about finishing this list with James Kelly on fiddle, and the king of the scene in Minneapolis, Paddy O’Brien, on button box? All on one album. All with Dáithí taking the lead on vocals. All wonderful.

“There are such incredible musicians joining me. Each has impeccable taste. How we did this was that I recorded my vocals first with guitar and then, as each was available, they came in and added whatever they wanted. It was perfect. I used almost every note they played.” The album is originally on New Folk Records and is also going to be distributed by Cló Iar-Chonnachta. We were talking with Dáithí in Donegal just before he left on a musical tour in France with long-time friend and collaborator, Liz Carroll. “How I selected the people

to invite to be on the album was easy. I love playing with everyone on this album. It was also great finding new arrangements of songs I have known forever. Liz is on two tracks with Billy, a Trían reunion!”

You hear Dáithí warming to the topic the more you can get him to talk about this album. He is usually reserved and gentlemanly, unless he is talking about music and musicians he loves. Then the words gush forth. “Seamus is a great fiddler and a great violinist. He was on two cuts. Paddy O’Brien is the real treasure in Minneapolis. *On the Banks of the River* is a song I just heard a couple of years ago from my friend, Christine Dowling. She is wonderful. Dean McGraw is on Colleen Roo. He is such a great figure in the music. Perfect taste. My engineer on this was John Wright here in Minneapolis. Incredible. It is so great to have an engineer who you absolutely trust to get the sound perfect the first time. Critical, when you have this many guest artists involved.” Ask him about anyone involved in this album, and Dáithí waxed rhapsodic. It is clear Dáithí was in 100% control of this project, and therefore could choose exactly the artists with whom he wanted to work.

Dáithí’s part in each track was recorded in Minneapolis, as mentioned. Some of the artists joined him there, and others added their parts in studios and set-ups around the world, as the musical files flew back and forth on the computers. “All you have to do is send the music in a drop box or email. It is really so simple thanks to technology,” explains Dáithí. A wonderful thing, this artistic control. “I only sang songs that are special for me,” Dáithí concludes, “I loved every note and each is special. One I get a real kick out of playing is *The Unquiet Grave*. I love the mix of an absolutely heartbreaking and tragic song with this bright, up-tempo melody.” During the conversations with Dáithí about the album, he agreed with many artists over the years who have commented that Irish music is filled with gorgeous, slow ballads. Much harder to find in the tradition are really quality up-tempo numbers. “I try to listen to almost everything. And I agree that the best time to start working on the next album is the minute you finish the current one.”

This one all began with the completion of his last album, *The Crow* in the Sun. Recorded a couple of years ago, this album is an all-instrumental gem featuring Dáithí on solo guitar performing mainly his own compositions. Trad guitar players around the world snatched it up and spent hours listening to what Dáithí was up to then. He is one of those musicians who enjoy genuine affection and real respect among the players who know him and his music. This does not come overnight. This was built one musical brick at a time. And, to get to the special place this Derry native inhabits takes a full career. There are few guitar players in the tradition more well-known and recognised. This is not an accident. This takes work. This takes talent. And, this takes dedication. If any of those terms sounds the least bit corny to you, you won’t make it to the same place that Dáithí inhabits professionally.

Following his tour in France with Liz Carroll, Dáithí was going to enjoy a couple of days at home to decompress before taking off on for teaching and performing weeks at Augusta Heritage Center (Elkins) and in Goderich, Ontario (with the Kane Sisters and Edel Fox), followed by festivals with Altan in August. Of special interest, of course, was the group’s then upcoming, fifth appearance at Milwaukee’s Irish Fest. In September he plays gigs in Ireland with his friends, Deryn and Tara Diamond, and October/November an extensive Altan tour in Germany. So, this is all a kind of description of where Dáithí is currently.

Lost River: Vol. 1 is the latest expression in an ever-morphing and expanding reservoir of creativity. He is special. If you are lucky enough to pick your writing assignments you can think of 25 years where you must have done something right, even if only rarely. Dáithí Sproule can choose his next album, and the artists who will join him, with certainty. Who would say no? Best of all, we can tip you to his next album. There will be a *Volume 2* for *Lost River*. Some of it is already recorded. “There are so many artists I admire who joined me on this album, I couldn’t get everyone in. So now we are all looking forward to *Volume 2*.” Who would say no?