



A Celtic Spirit...

Hailed as the “first lady of Irish music”, with a career spanning nearly 30 years – both with multi-million selling, Grammy award winning band, Clannad, and as a solo artist – Moya Brennan could be forgiven for taking some time out to rest on her achievements. However, the quiet life doesn’t seem to be on her immediate agenda, as Wears the Trousers’ Trevor Raggatt quickly found out!

I like busyness!’ the soft-spoken singer enters into a seemingly confessional mood, her gently lilting Irish brogue paralleling the sounds for which her music has become known, ‘You know in my first year of marriage I was still with **Clannad**, I did my first solo album and I had my first baby!’ A small chuckle, ‘So I think that gives you an indication... I mean I was doing the video of *Against the Wind* from

my first solo album and breast feeling in between takes!!’ Again a broad smile and a belly laugh accompanies the realisation that she might have offered up “too-much-information” so early in the interview, ‘So that sort of epitomises the way my career is – I do like busyness!!’

And busy she is too. As we speak just before Christmas she has, not one but, two albums to promote. Her solo album

Signature was released in the UK and parts of Europe in the autumn and is gaining plaudits while her 2005 offering *An Irish Christmas* has just been released in the States. So I wonder how she feels about her latest album. The response betrays an artist who still gets a buzz from the creative process. No jaded veteran muso, Ms Brennan ‘Well, the last studio album kinda took, on and off about two and a half years and the *Signature* album took about two and a half months!’ Again, an easy, self deprecating laugh, ‘Which was brilliant. So I started just after Easter last year, got stuck into it and was finished by the end of June. So the excitement was still there when I’d finished. It was great to do it that way – kinda **Boom, Wham!** You know, I’ve done 18 albums with Clannad and this is my 7th solo... years ago you’d demo all the stuff and then do it “properly” but you’d end up saying “Ach, it’s not as good as the demo!” But I’m really thrilled with it coz it’s really close to me, like snapshots or chapters of my own life.’

‘It’s only released in three countries so far, and it’s doing quite well. I suppose England’s the tricky one... it’s a difficult market England. So much music there and I’m not a chart selling act. I don’t show much midriff!’ Well perhaps she’s not vying with Nelly Furtado or Christine Aguilera for the No 1 slot these days but it’s striking the enduring influence her music has had. This brings a moment of reflection followed by agreement. ‘Well it is. And if you consider... over thirty years in the business if you go into a record store anywhere in Europe you will see either me or Clannad still there with albums selling from years ago. So you know, so it is a different way of doing it.’

‘And I love the freedom of it; doing my own thing because I’ve got my own studio at home here and playing with people I like. And you know that’s a great freedom... and not tied to any record company either. Coz that was the thing years ago, if somebody said “D’you want to come and sing on my album?” – and sometimes you’d want to do it for nothing – but you weren’t allowed! So you know, having that freedom is so good. And just singing with friends or just doing something. You know I had a call from Hans Zimmer and we ended up doing the *King Arthur* film theme together and some other music. Just being able to do that without having to say “Oh can I pleeeeeeeze! ...Teacher?” Well that’s great.’

Getting back to her current disc I comment that although it’s quoted as being her most personal album to date it doesn’t take a traditionally autobiographical route. ‘Oh it’s not and it’s not chronological either. It’s just flashbacks of moments... sad moments, childhood moments, happy moments and that – significant events. The way I write it’s not very obvious references. You know, a lot of my fans are having great fun trying to figure out which parts of my

life I'm actually singing about! But it's also like being brought up in the traditional style of Gaelic music, my first language, learning the old Gaelic songs. You know, they used to write in quite cryptic form so I suppose that's crossed over into my way of thinking. I sort of write it in a ...erm ...colour ...in a mood.'

Although tinged throughout with a distinctively Celtic sound and drawing on traditional themes *Signature* still seems a very contemporary and varied album. Tentatively I float the thought that she might one day try a more truly traditional sounding set, particularly given her skills on the harp. 'Well, I suppose down through the years I already have. I mean the first six Clannad albums were nothing but traditional songs. Thinking about it though, it would be nice because it is lovely to do those but I suppose it's wherever my mood takes me. I feel that if you do something it's nice to move on to something else. But it's nice to go back and forward as well. I'd hate to be doing the same sort of thing all the time – or maybe just what people relate to me as, as well, you know *Harry's Game* and that.'

'You know we delved into all sorts of areas. All bringing that sound into different types of moods and music. When we did an album called *Sirius* it was really slated because they were saying "Oh they're trying to be Fleetwood Mac" or whatever. But it was just us wondering what an American producer would do with our sound. People forgot that I grew up in a house with my Mother and Grandmother teaching us these old songs but, of course, my Father had a show-band. There was a fusion there and we allowed all that influence into our lives rather than oppress it. So there was always a touch of listening to my Dad playing and learning Elvis, Nat King Cole, Everley Brothers, Bill Haley and whatever was going around when I was growing up. So those kind of songs were always around as well.'

One of the striking and oft forgotten things about Clannad's output was that - among the more ambient, Celtic stereotype which inhabits public perception of the band - they also produced some great pop and rock music. 'Yeah, like *In a Lifetime* that we did with Bono... yeah there was.'

'You know it's like when I travel now people say to me "Oh I love the Celtic sound!" and I say "Well, what's the Celtic sound you're talking about?" because there is such a variety... there's the Chieftains side, there's the Riverdancy, dance music side (even though there's a part of the Clannad sound in that as well). But this sound they're referring to as the Celtic sound, it started with Clannad. It was something developed by Clannad and now people copy that, you know, like James Horner did for the *Titanic* thing, you know what I mean? And it's nice to think what we've achieved – without trying, you know

we didn't set out to – but we're in the history books for developing that sound that's now thought of as "the Celtic sound". And people like Lorena McKennitt would say that she's influenced by the Clannad sound and Anúna who did the songs for Riverdance and things like that too.'

'On the first of February there are the kinda Brit awards of Irish Music and we've been nominated for the Lifetime Achievement Award' a pause and a chuckle 'I hope that it doesn't mean that I have to stop now! But it's so nice to be acknowledged and I suppose that Clannad have a very significant musical history in the Irish scene. So you know in that way it is nice. But as you say, it is also nice that you can throw in a *Closer to your Heart*. Because that is a part of our upbringing as well, that show-band thing. And anybody that knows Clannad would understand that part of it. But I think that we still do it in our own style. And I think that a part of that is my voice.'



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Acknowledging that her music touches styles beyond the oohs and aahs of songs like *Robin, the Hooded Man* I do confess I was surprised to see her album opens with *Purple Haze*! This provokes a huge laugh! 'I know, a lot of people went "WHAT?!?!?!!" But it just happened!' For clarity it should be said that the song isn't a cover and Moya elaborates. 'Of course that's a very significant part of my life that whole scene, listening to Jimi Hendrix so it's very funny that those words just came in because... because it's all just part of my life. And I suppose it's funny to you because it's such a well known title but, ach, I'm not afraid of anything anymore!'

With such a rich musical environment growing up it seems inevitable that music should become a fundamental part of the Brennan siblings lives. 'Music would have been there whatever! I was actually teaching music before Clannad decided to

go professional in 1976. I'd gone to the *Royal Irish Academy* and then back to Donegal to teach. Then a year on we decided that we should give it a go and went professional. I mean, Clannad never went out to make strides and make money and become famous. It was something which just grew within the family. My father bought a pub coz that's where the scene was moving from the dancehalls. It meant there was a stage for us when we came home from our school. So we used to get up and just play all these things as well as the traditional stuff. It really confused people when you were doing a Beatles song, a Donovan song, a Joni Mitchell song followed by a traditional song. People didn't know where to look!! I suppose it was very unusual but, of course, we didn't think so. Then when we won a competition to do our first album; it went on to interest a couple who brought us to Germany and it was there that we thought we should go for it.'

'You know, where I come from it's a very laid back place and its attitude to Clannad is laid back. And I think that's why the sound is what it is because of where we come from and the Gaelic and everything. And that's just how we went about it. It took a while because we just let it meander into our sound to the point that when *Harry's Game* happened we hadn't a clue when everybody said "Where did you get that sound?" and we were all "What sound?" You know what I mean? It was lovely to think that it's developed the way it did. And that was the strength of it. That's why I'm still doing it because I love music, I absolutely love it! We're all doing it because of the love of it. It had a real soul.'

This reflection on music, fame and motivation brings a philosophical turn to the conversation and suddenly the singer's tone becomes more serious. 'Maybe that's why so much music now doesn't last; it doesn't have that. It's done for the pure object of being famous or "Look, I'm this great singer!" you know? Like in the style of the X-factor... but you don't learn anything... you learn how to sing, you learn how to be on stage but you don't get "inside" anything.'

With thoughts turning a little more serious I wonder whether it's appropriate to ask how Moya feels about *Signature* exposing her private emotions to the glare publicity. 'Well, I mean, they've already been explored in my autobiography so it's no big deal in a way. But you know, *Black Night* is my favourite song on the record; I love singing it though it's very much the tragic part of my life. But you know, as I said, it's already been written in the papers, been in the news – a moment that looking back on it now wouldn't be the proudest moment of my life – and it's a feeling I can still feel about the abortion that I had, I suppose it's like that sort of loneliness you feel during that time. And that's basically where that song comes from.'

'And it's more the emotions. And that's why I like doing interviews sometimes because I think you learn more about why you wrote things from people talking to you. You know, people see different things in music and I think in this sort of music particularly it's open for people to read that into – maybe they can become part of it. And it's been really well received. The only place I've toured with it yet was Holland and it's been doing extremely well there – which I'm really thrilled about. And in America they're releasing it in May because just now it's all happening over there with the Christmas album – that's going really well for me and I'm going there on Friday to do some small shows and those bookstores where you sing and sign, some Christmas TV shows – it's going to be great fun, just me and the harp player – then finishing off with these two special concerts in Atlanta and a few of the rest of my band are coming out to join me there; you know it's really fun doing it.'

Mention of *An Irish Christmas* begs an obvious question and provokes a knowing chuckle... 'I did it because, particularly in America, I'd seen loads of sort of "Celtic Christmas" albums and I've listened to them... and if they're in search of the Celtic sound something like Clannad or my family's stuff... anyway I thought, "Well they aren't really there yet so why don't I do it?" So that's why I did it in my style and I'm thrilled with it. So it's a little bit different to the norm.' And different it is too with some beautiful arrangements of well known carols with that authentic Clannad flavour. 'Yeah, like *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen* which is a kinda diddle-iddle jig time. Or adding a little tune at the end of *Deck the Halls*. And *The Carol of the Bells*. That song's Ukrainian so I thought that I could really push that, you know, using the pipes and the electric guitar... and that was great fun doing all that...' One of the coincidental beauties of the CD is that it seems to leave a little more space for Brennan's harping. 'Well it does. And sometimes I use the harp in a very simple way as a texture and it's really lovely to use that way because harps can be over-used and then you miss out on the whole feel of it. I call myself a simple harp player. And that's in keeping with the sounds. It's that sort of thing of carrying moments or using it creating an emotion or feel. I love that, I love it when it's there creating those moments.'

One of the most interesting things about *Signature* is that, for the first time it blends the twin tracks of Brennan's music – secular and spiritual. 'Well, because of being known from Clannad when I did a couple of contemporary spiritual/Christian records a lot of people thought "Oh, she's become all religious or something..." and you know some people didn't come to my gigs because they thought that maybe I was going to preach to them. But it wasn't that at all – it was just another part of my life.

And I'd love to tell them "It's OK! Everybody has a right to believe in what they want to." And the thing that fascinates me is if I said to people I'd gone to Nepal and "Oh, I've gotten into spirituality in a big way, got into Buddha and wisdom and everything" then people would have been going "Wow! Great!!". So I'm just going "Why? Why won't you allow me to find God in my own way and on my own territory?" And I did and it's become really important to me: my life, my faith and my family... the way I live... You know, it's made me into a better person. And that's what we all strive for. It sorts you out, for sure.'

'What's nice about *Signature* is because it's chapters and snapshots of my life this is a big part of it so it's OK to include it. And it was OK to do the Christmas album because, well...' once again an infectious laugh lights up the room, '...everybody does Christmas songs!'



Photo: Wonky Eggs

...we're not doing one of those not-talking-to-each-other-on-stage things...

'You know, there's all sorts of mixtures that come to my gigs which is really what I wanted to achieve. And what I've also discovered is that people, and well known people who know me from Clannad, they're sometimes surprised that I don't kinda give them lectures but, ironically, then they start asking me... because we all search. And it's really important to realise that the spiritual side of your make up needs to be fed. And when people realise that... you know, it's really difficult to tell young people that because they think "I don't need it and it's not part of my life" and all but they will soon realise that later on. I mean, the suicide rates and things like that are on such an up and really it's partly because of this spiritual drought. You know, if you're an addict and you go for treatment no matter what kind of treatment you go for, you *HAVE* to find your spiritual side to achieve the drive of getting through it. Because the whole point of life is that you can't do it by yourself, you cannot do it all by yourself. So you need... for me, I need God in my life.'

'You know, I take things on now and years ago I would have said "Ooooh let me

think about it and, yeah, maybe if and..." but now I can just say yes to everything and I know that I'm not by myself. I know it's a funny way of looking at it but it's incredible. Comforting... And like I said, it's also made me into a better person – though I'm not saying I've found the perfect answer or I'm the perfect person or anything like that – but it's just that there's something to strive for.'

As if promoting two albums across the globe wasn't enough to be getting on with there are other momentous events on the near horizon. The first gig in ten years for the band that made her famous. Again, the enthusiasm is palpable... 'Oh that'll be fun! Would you believe we've already been rehearsing – it's going to sound amazing! Because of the time span it's exciting again and that was really important for Clannad, because of where we came from. But 10 years ago we came to a stage of "Well are we doing it for the sake of doing it?" and we didn't want to just do another Clannad album just for the sake of doing one. So it was really important for us to have a pause. Of course, we didn't know it would be 10 years. But it's been good because we've all been doing different things and now we can bring those influences in as far as thinking about going back into the studio after just playing together again. It's really great, it's lovely just having that because I guess we can all so feel the excitement. And because we're all family we're not doing one of those not-talking-to-each-other-on-stage things – you know the way some bands have reunions but they have their own floor in the hotels because they can't risk bumping into each other. We'd continually be at home playing together at our father's pub, with my brothers singing. And we'd go up in ones and twos or whatever. You know, like being there together but not in a Clannad way or anything. So it's a nice feeling there.'

So maybe Wears the Trousers can get the inside skinny on what the future holds for Clannad as the singer muses on what might come next... 'You know I think it might be a good time maybe to take it further in the sense of maybe looking at an album or taking on a dozen gigs next year. You know, not to be thinking of it as getting into a big big thing... but of course, I'm saying this and you just don't know where it might go to. But it's nice with the lifetime achievement award thing coming – and we'll be performing at that.'

'You know, Clannad were always getting options to do gigs and we used to say "No, we're not happening at the moment." So now that we're running with the band it'll be interesting to see what happens with things like that! But I'd still like to continue with my own stuff as well because I'm really enjoying it, you know.'

Well, whatever the future holds somehow you get the feeling that she'll enjoy it. After all, she does like busyness!