



Bill Margeson our man in Chicago brings us an insight into one of the Windy City's Up and Coming Irish bands, the very talented Gan Bua.

Beyond doubt, Chicago is one of the real, international hotbeds for traditional music. The city's super popular group, Gan Bua, is surely one of the highlights. Formed in Chicago during the September of 2001 by percussionist, Jackie Moran and fiddle player, Christy Bain, Gan Bua's performance and travel schedule have joined the group's busy recording career to accurately reflect the band's steadily growing popularity.

Gan Bua is composed of Irish-American musicians including Detroit's, Sean Gavin on uilleann pipes and flute, St. Paul's, Brian Miller on guitar and Brian Hart from St. Louis rounding things out on vocals, whistles and concertina. The band has re-formed once since its 2001 inception, and as Bain states, "We love the current line-up. Each player is really, really good at what they do." Jackie Moran adds, "We have a real unanimity of opinion in the band. We all love traditional music and our sound is based on the groups of the 60's and early 70's like De Dannan, Planxty and The Bothy's." The response to the group's two albums and busy performance schedules indicate a real connection with their audiences.

That 2001 inception came about when Jackie and Christy looked around their hometown and saw that there wasn't a really full-time, all-traditional group in the city. At that same time, Chicago's Jimmy Keane was just forming the famous bohola, so there was a gap at that moment, soon to be filled by both. The City of Broad Shoulders had several iconic musicians such as Liz Carroll, John Williams, Kevin Henry, John Daly, Larry Nugent, Dennis Cahill, and many more have come since. Still, there was opportunity. And, we are talking about Chicago, here.

As Moran and Bain looked around, there was no shortage of talented musicians from whom to choose, and, especially, as they looked to players they had come to know and respect over the years. Thousands of sessions, concerts and recording venues had given each an encyclopedic knowledge of the talent pool. Brian Hart brought a full tenor voice to the proceedings and a talent level that has seen him win the All-Ireland Senior Men's Ballad (English) Award; the first American to do so. All the members of the group have competed successfully at fleadh's in Ireland, as well as the States. Brian Miller has recorded in Ireland with several musicians and Sean Gavin is touring with a Canadian musical/Irish dance show as this is written.

Clearly, the group is no locally-based collection of musicians trying to break out of Chicago. This is a group that has established itself individually and as a group in the eyes and ears of the traditional community. Having performed from Boston to Atlanta, there is a 2008 tour of Ireland, England and Europe in the works. Add to that the fact that Jackie has a schedule that takes him to Europe about six times a year to play there with his very popular European-based group, Comas. Add to that Christy Bain's ongoing work with the

Welsh group, Crasdant, at venues such as last year's Celtic Connections in Scotland and Celtic Colours in Canada, and we have the picture well in hand of a group with no need "to break out of Chicago", but a group being challenged to co-ordinate the schedules while staying on course, and together, based out of Chicago. "We really want to take the group as far and high as we can," says Bain. "We are all 100% committed, and that is what it takes."

The group's exciting sound was captured in its second album, "Live at Martyrs". Martyrs' is a popular and eclectic performance club in Chicago that draws some of the very best in the business such as Flook, Lúnasa and we hasten to add Gan Bua! Live was recorded all in one evening at a special concert. In addition to the level of the playing, there has also been favourable comment on the sound. Featuring great separation and balance, engineer, Ray Quinn captured the excitement of the live performance, with none of the usual, attendant sound compromises. Christy comments, "We are very proud of the album. 99% of it was done in one go, actually as it was performed on that evening in May of 2006." Adds Jackie, "We got everything ready that afternoon in rehearsal for the concert and ended up including one of the takes from then on the album. We think it turned out really well, and sets a standard for our next studio album, which we are getting ready to record now."

The approach is certainly a salute to the enduring power and excitement of the re-awakening of Irish traditional music begun by those groups of the 60's and 70's. "They really set the goal. We model ourselves on them without trying to copy them in any way. We think our sound is unique, but it certainly tips its cap to those groups," says Jackie. Christy adds, "I grew up in a home where traditional music was played and respected. My uncle gave me my first, full-sized fiddle!" That instrument is still in his hands. An 1890's German made, Hopf, Christy holds onto it proudly for its history and its sound.

Part of the group's unique sound, so based in the tradition, has to be set to Moran's unique percussion playing. The joke used to be in America to try to find an album, which did not have Jackie playing on it, so in demand was he. The ubiquitous nature of his percussion goes way beyond the favoured bodhrán, and may include a full range of instruments covering the world, really. It is always subtle, but there. Add Bain's percussive "northern style" of fiddle playing, and the group's source of its compelling rhythmic approach is obvious. Audiences love the style as the group easily dips from tune to tune, song to song, all selected by the band for the love of those tunes. The transitions are seamless, and apparently effortless.

Gan Bua is a group that is just now coming to the forefront internationally. It is part of the cycle in the music. As other bands change, disband or simply fade away, the tradition is blessed by what seems to be an inexhaustible pool of talent that comes to the front of the stage. It is Gan Bua's time. Here they come.