

Boston.com: “Eire apparent: The High Kings come into their own on ‘Memory Lane’”

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By James Reed

‘Puppets’ isn’t exactly the right word, but Darren Holden admits it springs to mind when he thinks about the origins of his band. The High Kings, a quartet of strapping men singing hardy Irish ballads with a pop sensibility, were created in 2008, groomed by the same team behind Celtic Woman and geared for the PBS market. As talented as the singers were, they were also the product of someone else’s imagination.

“If you look at our ‘Live in Dublin’ [concert DVD], we’re almost choreographed, like a Celtic New Kids on the Block,” Holden says about those days.

The strangest part was the fact that each of them had diverse backgrounds as established singers and songwriters. Between them, they play 13 instruments, and yet they were often backed by other musicians and their folk repertoire was chosen for them. Holden says they knew that was all part of the plan, but grew disenchanted with it soon enough.

“Everything was being done for us at the start,” Holden says. “When you’re in a group that’s predominantly for PBS, you kind of look good and sound good and you do what you’re told. I’d say about six months into the whole thing, we were like, ‘No, I don’t want to do this anymore.’ That’s when we started picking up the instruments and said, ‘Can we play?’ It’s heartening, then, to hear the High Kings mature into a more nuanced group on its latest release, “Memory Lane.” Again featuring Irish balladry (“Red Is the Rose,” “The Irish Rover”) in contemporary arrangements, the new album also sounds like a fresh start. Holden and his bandmates play their own instruments, they chose the material, and the newfound freedom seeps into the lively and occasionally unhinged performances.

Their music is the high-spirited kind that will play exceedingly well in Boston on St. Patrick’s Day, when the band headlines the Paradise Rock Club. The potential for mischief — an Irish band playing traditional Irish music on St. Patrick’s Day in Boston — isn’t lost on Holden, by the way.

“That’s trouble right there, isn’t it?” he says. “In all fairness, the type of show that we do is tailor-made for Boston on St. Paddy’s Day. It’s raucous and wild and two hours of nonstop mayhem.”

That’s not the impression you might have gotten from the High Kings’ self-titled 2008 debut, which skewed more to the reverent side. Still, the spark was evident, from the way

their voices entwined in lilting, a cappella harmonies to the chemistry they exuded on stage.

“We were all picked from four different corners of the world,” Holden says, adding that he had just come off four years of playing Billy Joel in the Broadway production of the musical “Movin’ Out.

The initial pitch for the group appealed to Holden: a new Irish acoustic group in the vein of the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners. “I loved the idea because I had been looking for an excuse to develop an act singing Irish music at the time,” he says. “Growing up in Ireland, whether you like Irish ballads or not, you’re surrounded by them. They’re always there, and even if you don’t deliberately go and learn them, you know them just from hearing them in bars or clubs or TV. You don’t know how much you love them until you delve into them.”

His bandmates were familiar with them, too, having grown up as the scions of some of Ireland’s most important folk musicians. Finbarr Clancy comes from a long line of Irish music royalty dating back to the Clancy Brothers. Martin Furey had a popular folk duo with his sister called Bohinta, and he’s the son of legendary piper and singer Finbar Furey. And Brian Dunphy, whose father, Sean, was a star of the showband era in Ireland, has been a soloist with “Riverdance” and performed as one of the Three Irish Tenors.

Holden remembers the first time the four singers congregated. “We all sat around and we all started singing and we were totally in tune with each other,” he says. “That was one of the moments where the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I thought, wow, this is really weird, but in a good way. We just knew we had something.” He wasn’t initially convinced, however, that audiences would sustain yet another group peddling old Irish tunes to a new generation.

“I never thought for a second that they would, especially the way we were the first time around when we came over here three years ago,” he says. “Looking back now, I felt we were borderline cheesy. I didn’t think it was going to appeal to anyone except maybe the 50-plus crowd, which was fine because there’s a huge market there.”

Instead, something unexpected began taking shape. Amid the folks who knew the old songs intimately, younger fans in their teens and 20s started attending the shows. Holden tells a story that supports his theory that fresh-faced fans are among the High Kings’ biggest supporters.

“The Dropkick Murphys were up the road from us last night at the House of Blues in Cleveland,” he says. “We had about 50 people who didn’t get into that show and ended up at ours.”

When reminded that the High Kings will overlap with the Murphys again — on their home turf in Boston next week, no less — Holden stands his ground.

“We’re going to kick their [expletive] big-time,” he says, laughing. “No, don’t tell them I said that. They’re scary.”

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