

The Irish Echo: “High Kings reign over Irish revival”

July 22, 2015

By Colleen Taylor

When I boarded the train to go see one of my favorite bands last weekend, I travelled with a hypothesis in mind. I wagered that no other group in Ireland today is better able to rejuvenate the Irish music tradition than the High Kings. Although I already had countless interviews, gigs, and albums listens with which to posit my theory, at that stage, it remained conjecture. But after seeing the Kings live at Killarney’s Gleneagle, and after talking with them about their music, I left Kerry with my theory proven beyond doubt. No other band can rival the High Kings for talent of reinterpretation, spirit of tradition, and integrity of purpose. Legacy was what initially brought Finbarr Clancy, Darren Holden, Brian Dunphy and Martin Furey together, and now, after only seven years as the High Kings, they have become a legacy themselves.

“Bringing the music to the forefront again,” Finbarr Clancy told me, was the High Kings’ mission from the start. Clancy, Holden, Dunphy, and Furey grew up immersed in Irish music (their surnames speak for themselves), but before they came together in 2008, Irish music had been eclipsed by popular culture in Ireland. Songs like “The Rocky Road to Dublin” were being pushed out by tracks such as “Sweet Home Alabama.” Instead of Irish folk songs, English and American popular music became the order of the day in public venues across the country. “When we were growing up,” said the son of Finbar Furey, “you could go into any bar and hear Irish music, but by the time we got together, that had gone completely out of fashion... People weren’t playing Irish songs.

“I think that’s why we were put together,” continued Furey, with his three band-mates indicating their agreement, “to keep these songs alive. I honestly think it’s fair to say we’ve changed that.”

It’s most certainly fair. The audience at Killarney’s Gleneagle was packed to the brim with Kerry locals, fans from Cork who had come up for the Gaelic football match, and tourists alike, and yet nearly everyone, no matter their origin or age, sang along with the High Kings as they belted out “The Rising of the Moon,” “Oh Maggie” and the “The Fields of Athenry.” The spirit of the four singers was contagious—energy was bouncing from instrument to instrument, off the walls, between audience members, all culminating in the harmony of Clancy, Dunphy, Holden, and Furey, backed by their enthusiastic fans.

Such palpable, audible energy is musical proof that you get what you give. After all, the High Kings don't approach their shows like your typical musician or band. When they play, it's about even more than entertainment and originality: each melody they sing, each chord they strike is imbued with a passion for the history behind the notes. Finbarr Clancy thinks of particular songs, like "Go Lassie Go" and "The Parting Glass," as familial memorialization: "I was singing with my dad [Bobby Clancy] and uncles since 20 years ago. They're all gone now, but the songs keep them around. When you sing them, you think of them." For Dublin native Brian Dunphy, the most meaningful song is "Dublin in the Rare Auld Times," which the band performed a couple weeks ago to a packed house at Dublin's prestigious National Concert Hall: "It was an honor to stand on that stage again. My dad, Sean Dunphy, played there for many, many years," Dunphy said.

But to define the High Kings solely in terms of the past is a mistake. These musicians represent the future as much as they honor history. Although they sing the old songs of the Irish musical tradition, nothing about their music sounds old-fashioned or tired out. Rather, the High Kings take ownership of a distinctive, modernized sound all their own; their harmonies are a trademark, a unique stylization that could not be replicated by any other set of voices. While the Fureys, Clancys, and Dubliners might be the High Kings' muses, they aren't equivalent with the band's self-identity. The High Kings are their own group with an individualized mission and their own, collective musical sensibility. They have taken the old songs and completely revitalized them, grounded them in contemporary music and peppered them with influences from their own various genre interests, which range from Broadway to the Beach Boys. The High Kings' sound and style is the result of a fortuitous combination of four extremely talented musicians—an animated sound that has one foot in the present and one in the past. It's a music with echoes that follow you long after their show is done.

It's not uncommon to leave a High Kings gig with new interests and a sense of tradition you didn't have when you entered. The four musicians pride themselves on exceeding expectations and changing preconceptions about Irish folk music, particularly for their young audience members. The Oxygen music festival is one of Darren Holden's favorite examples: "There was a band all the teenagers were listening to that were on before us and after they finished, the tent emptied. But once we went out and hit it, they all came back in again. Then they went out and started buying our CDs." The range of High Kings fandom—from young to old, Irish to international, newly converted followers to Kingmaniacs that have been there since the band's start on PBS in 2008—speaks to their versatility and natural talent as a group. Clancy defines the music as "rootsy, bare bones and rough and ready,"

which, as Holden explained, allows the band to play any kind of venue, any time. They laughed telling me about a show they improvised at the Hibernian Athletic Club in New York when the electricity went out. When the room went black, the band got off the stage and went down into the audience. Candles were brought out and the people crowded around them as the music continued through the night.

There's an immense joy for the High Kings when they bring their music abroad, particularly to the States, where people come to their shows with the lyrics to their original tracks already memorized. In fact, the U.S. is the setting of much of the group's original songwriting. "When we go over to the States, we're all together, we all have our instruments, and we just end up writing songs because you're there in the hotel for four days, so you use the time to bounce ideas off each other and see what works," Clancy said. This band is just as skilled at writing their own Irish folk songs as they are at re-arranging the traditional ones, of which originals like "Oh Maggie" and "Ireland's Shore" are but two examples. After their original release, "Friends For Life," in 2013, fans like myself were immediately thirsty for more original High Kings music, and so the band envisions their next album as 50-50 combination: half tried and tested songs, half new releases.

Despite the fact that these musicians have already carved their names in the Irish music annals, and despite the fact that they inspire crowds and re-energize the tradition with every show they play, they still feel their mission is incomplete. For instance, the four musicians particularly want to see a change in Irish radio. They strive for the return of Irish folk music to the airwaves across Ireland, and they want to do more with their own original work, to cultivate more hometown response to their output as songwriters. Still, at the end of the day, it always comes back to the original purpose that joined the four Kings in the first place: the love for tradition that defines them. Darren Holden summed up the band's principles with modesty and sincerity: "For our era, we like to think we took something that was passed on to us and maybe raised the bar with it a little bit, kept it alive, so that people can look at that and see that's where you need to take it on in twenty years." With nods of agreement from his three band-mates, he finished with, "We like to feel like we did it right, that we were respectful while advancing the Irish music." Anyone who hears the High Kings live knows that they have absolutely raised the bar, and that they have undoubtedly done it right. For every old song they resurrect, they advance two more.

Thirteen instruments, four exquisite voices, creative arrangements, and original harmonies are what make the High Kings a fantastic band, one of Ireland's best. But it's statements like the above from Holden, this collective integrity of musical purpose, that really sets these four musicians apart from the rest. Selfless cultural

dedication is the High Kings' secret musical ingredient. It's why they can play great, energizing music long after the lights have gone out.

If you miss the High Kings live on tour, you'll be missing something incredible. But luckily the High Kings are doing more U.S. gigs this year than ever before. After headlining the Dublin, Ohio and Milwaukee Irish Festivals next month, they have shows lined up in Buffalo and Syracuse for Aug. 23 and Sept. 11, respectively. Then, in October, they will be in Albany, N.Y., Norfolk, Conn., and Somerville, Mass. Finally, the High Kings have another March 2016 U.S. tour in the works. Check out their dates at thehighkings.com and follow them on Facebook.

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