

Friday, March 19, 2010, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Altan



Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh *lead vocals, fiddle*
 Ciarán Tourish *fiddle, tin whistle, backing vocals*
 Dermot Byrne *button accordion, melodeon*
 Dáithí Sproule *guitar, vocals*
 Ciarán Curran *bouzouki, bouzouki guitar*

Altan celebrates 25 years together in 2010.

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Over the past 25 years, **Altan** have established themselves as one of the most important live acts to play traditional Irish music in Ireland and on the world stage. Altan have toured all over the United States and Europe. They also enjoy popularity in Japan, where they frequently tour, and have hosted Altan festivals in the middle of Tokyo to thousands of enthusiastic fans.

The founding members, the late Frankie Kennedy and his partner, Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh, lead singer and fiddler with the band, began their musical career whilst teaching in a school in Malahide in North County Dublin, playing music for fun and enjoyment, not knowing that it would end up as their main way of life and bring them all over the world. Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Ní Mhaonaigh started out by playing with and meeting older musicians from the Donegal tradition, like John Doherty, Con Cassidy, James Byrne, Dinny McLaughlin, Vincent Campbell and Ms. Ní Mhaonaigh's own father, Francie, who shared their music with them and most importantly, their friendship. The pair learned their music, tried to emulate their style and listened to their general philosophy of life, which in retrospect was just as important as the music. Later, it would be Francie who translated the beautiful Gaelic songs into English on all of the Altan recordings to date. Francie was also responsible for the translations of "Barbara Allen" and "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" on two projects with the legendary Dolly Parton that involved Altan. Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Ní Mhaonaigh made their first forays into live shows in the United States in 1985, releasing two albums together as a duo: 1983's *Ceol Aduaidh* ("Music of the North") and the self-titled *Altan* in 1987.

Altan as a band began as a quartet with Mr. Kennedy on flute and Ms. Ní Mhaonaigh on fiddle and songs, joined by Ciarán Curran on bouzouki and Mark Kelly and Dáithí Sproule sharing the role of guitar player, Mr. Kelly touring with the band in Europe and Mr. Sproule in the United States. Later, Paul O'Shaughnessy on fiddle joined, augmenting and driving the sound of the band to new levels on Green Linnet recordings *Horse with a Heart* (1989), *The Red Crow* (1990), *Harvest Storm* (1991) and *Island Angel* (1993). *The Red Crow* became the first of three

Altan albums to win the prestigious Celtic/British Isles Album of the Year Award from the National Association of Independent Record Distributors and Manufacturers.

Ciarán Tourish on fiddle and whistle joined the band for the *Harvest Storm* recording, adding his innovative harmonies and counter melodies. The context of having three fiddles in the band helped drive Altan to newer heights and introduced the Donegal fiddle tunes, which the band became renowned for, to a much wider audience. Altan are no stranger to the *Billboard* world music chart: *Island Angel* was its fourth-best-selling album in 1994.

In the meantime, Frankie Kennedy was diagnosed with cancer, but continued to steer the band to international recognition and negotiating with Virgin Records U.K., to sign the band before his death in September 1994. This was a significant signing, as up until this traditional music was not on any major label. Altan recorded three albums for Virgin records: *Blackwater* (1996), *Runaway Sunday* (1997) and *The Blue Idol* (2002). This merger with a major record label helped Altan bring their music, song and culture to a wider audience worldwide and paved the way for up and coming younger bands to tour extensively all over the world—crucially, the band made no musical compromise to the traditional music they played and recorded.

Altan have proven to be important ambassadors of the music and culture of Ireland, so much so that they were invited to accompany the Irish President, Mary McAleese on several State visits, visiting Greece, Korea and Japan. Altan were asked to play at the White House twice by U.S. President Bill Clinton, and played again for him when he visited Ireland. In 2006, the Irish government honored the band by putting them on an official Irish postage stamp, one of the highest honors bestowed upon any living artist in Ireland (the only others honored in this set of four stamps were The Chieftains, The Dubliners and Makem and Clancy). Altan were invited to play by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2007, and were granted the celebrated Arkansas Traveler Award from Governor Mike Huckabee. "Tommy Bhetty's Waltz" from *The Red Crow* was

featured in the 1997 Oscar-winning film *Good Will Hunting*, starring Robin Williams.

Altan have played their music in some of the most prestigious venues in the world, including the Sydney Opera House, the Hollywood Bowl, the Royal Albert Hall, the Alte Opera Frankfurt, the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles and many more. They have played music and recorded with The Chieftains, Dolly Parton, Bonnie Raitt, Alison Krauss and Ricky Skaggs, to name but a few. In 2003, they won the award for Best Group at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards. In 2005, they recorded their latest studio album *Local Ground* and like every other Altan offering it was met with positive and enthusiastic reviews. The band have gained gold and platinum status in Ireland with their record sales and have won numerous awards in the music business as one of the most popular bands playing traditional folk or world music in the world.

In recent years Altan have been exploring and experimenting with their music using orchestral arrangements of their most popular pieces. The arrangements have been scored by the highly respected arranger Fiachra Trench and have been performed with the Ulster Orchestra, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and with the Royal Scottish Opera Orchestra. In 2010, Altan will release a 25th anniversary celebration album with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, and embark on an international tour with both orchestra and band lineup. Altan are also in pre-production on another studio album.

Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh (*lead vocals, fiddle*) was born and raised in the Donegal Gaeltacht of Gaith Dobhair. Her first language was Irish, and from her earliest years she was surrounded by music and song. Now one of the leading exponents of Donegal fiddle music, she received her start on the instrument from her father, Francie, a great fiddle teacher with a wealth of unusual local tunes, many learnt in turn from his mother, Roise. She also received tuition and inspiration from fiddler, Dinny McLaughlin, who was a frequent visitor to the home when she was young. Ms. Ní Mhaonaigh has always had an equal love of singing and again learnt many songs from neighbors and friends in Gaith Dobhair. As well as her work with Altan,

over the years Ms. Ní Mhaonaigh has presented traditional music programs on radio and television, including the classic radio show, *The Long Note*, and the television series, *The Pure Drop*.

Ciarán Tourish (*fiddle, tin whistle, backing vocals*) is from Buncrana, in east Donegal, also the home of Dinny McLaughlin, and so, though he started on the whistle, he had the great advantage of Dinny's teaching near at hand. In addition to his mastery of the dance music tradition, Mr. Tourish's quick ear and a love of harmony and counterpoint have led to his always being in demand as a valued collaborator on non-Altan (and even non-Irish music) projects with a wide range of musicians and singers, including Matt Molloy, Mary Black, Maura O'Connell, Martin O'Connor, Dolores Keane, De Danann, and American musicians Jerry Douglas and Tim O'Brien.

Dermot Byrne (*button accordion, melodeon*), also a native of Donegal, guested on two Altan albums, *The Red Crow* and *Island Angel*, before joining the band in 1994. Like Mairead, Mr. Byrne had music from his father, Tomás O Beirn, from the Gaeltacht area of Teileann, and heard all the great Donegal fiddlers, the Dohertys, Cassidys and Byrnes from his infancy. With this start, Mr. Byrne was a renowned accordion player before he reached his teens, he has played and recorded with many great musicians including Seamus and Manus McGuire, Frankie Gavin and Pierre Schrye, and he also has his own solo recording.

Dáithí Sproule (*guitar, vocals*) is the very much the commuting guitarist: born and raised in Derry, he has lived for many years in Minnesota. After first inspirations from the Beatles, Mr. Sproule's first traditional Irish songs were learnt from his friend, Sean O hEili, and from singers in the Gaeltacht of Rannafast. His first album was with Tríona, Maighread and Micheal O Domhnaill (Skara Brae). Mr. Sproule got seriously into accompanying the instrumental music when he began to sit in on the traditional sessions in the Four Seasons in Capel Street in Dublin in the 1970s, where he received a great grounding in the traditional music of the whole country (and very much

including Donegal tunes) from the fiddle-playing of John Kelly, Senior, and his sons, James and John. Mr. Sproule first went to the United States to record and tour with James Kelly and accordion player Paddy O'Brien, and since has recorded and performed with many wonderful musicians, including Tommy Peoples, Seamus and Manus McGuire, Liz Carroll and Billy McComiskey (in the group Trian), and Peter Ostroushko.

Ciarán Curran (*bouzouki, bouzouki guitar*) is a native of Kinawley, Co. Fermanagh, an area rich in music and song, and brings his strong family musical tradition to bear on an instrument relatively new to Irish traditional music, the *bouzouki*. Mr. Curran's uncle, Ned Curran, is a great fiddle player and has given the band unusual tunes. Mr. Curran was introduced to a lot of traditional music and musicians by his friend, Cathal McConnell (flute player with The Boys of the Lough), from whom he also learned many tunes. Another friend of his, fiddle player Ben Lennon from Co. Leitrim, taught him much about the rhythms involved in traditional music. Mr. Curran has worked with Co. Antrim singer Len Graham, fiddle players Ben Lennon and Seamus Quinn and singer Gabriel McArdle.