

ALTAN LIVE IN BELFAST

20 JANUARY 2020

The Duncairn, Belfast

18th January 2020

There's a strongly held view that Altan are the finest traditional Irish band in the world, bar none. I imagine the people holding that opinion has grown in number, joined by a large contingent in the packed audience at The Duncairn, who witness a quite superb show by the Donegal quartet. For over thirty years, the band has curated, publicised and brought the Donegal airs and tunes to a world wide audience.

Tonight they delighted, and entertained the crowd with a onslaught of virtuoso musicianship and sheer sense of joy that was impossible not to be affected by.

Fronted as ever by the enchanting and affable Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh, and despite the disclaimer that much of the material was of a sad nature, the band lead the crowd on a merry dance, some slow, some quick, all exalting the emotions in differing directions. Impossible to sit still during the reels and jigs, difficult not to moved by the slow, graceful airs.

Physiotherapy for the soul!

Featuring selected tracks from their most recent album *'The Gap of Dreams'*, Itself a thing of beauty, the gig showed a band at the top of their game, seemingly having as much fun, if not more as the audience. A mention, as always from Mairead, to her much missed partner Frankie Kennedy, and his suggestion that a tune based on wet seaweed, Dulaman is actually a Beatles song, "*Kelp*"! The camaraderie on stage is evident throughout and the good humour shared with the audience, as are stories behind the songs. Stories of fables and tales of long ago, of lost pipers, and mermaids bewitching sailors to their death, and of attempted bigamy. Perhaps not the best ad for Donegal tourism, but the craic is ninety!

Mairead is the focal point of the ensemble, and dressed in a black dress with silver reflecting pieces, at times it appears that sparks were flying from her fingertips as they flew over the strings of her fiddle.

'The Piper in the Cave' being a early warning of the musical dexterity that was to follow.

But this is a band of equals, if you would listen to Mairead. She was matched, and her liquid vocals were enhanced and enriched by her friends, and band mates on stage.

Mark Kelly, who was superb on Guitar, at times providing the bass on his upper strings, although his stand up comedy perhaps needs some work!

Martin Tourish, on Piano Accordion, who plugged his book on the Altan back catalogue at every opportune moment, and was the writer of one of the most affecting pieces on the night, in *'The Road Home'*. And on Bouzouki, the quiet man of the group, Mr Ciaran Curran, who let his instrument do the talking, and it was a right little chatterbox!

The band were added a number of tunes by guest Connor Caldwell on fiddle.

But the undoubted star of the night is Mairead. Her voice is as strong, and as soft as it has ever been, and continues to be a thing of great beauty.

Thanks also to Ray Giffen and the Staff at The Duncairn, for continuing to bring such world class talent to the North of the city and to one of the best music venues in Belfast.

New bands are flourishing on the Traditional scene, but Altan have set a high bar, and I think it will be a while before I see a band to match them.

Go raibh maith agat Altan!