

# Altan

## *The Widening Gyre*

Street Date: February 17, 2014



In the last dozen years, no traditional Irish band has had a wider impact on audiences and music lovers throughout the world than Altan. They have moved audiences from Donegal to Tokyo to Seattle with their heartwarming, dynamic live performances and with their exquisitely produced, award-winning recordings that range from the most touching old Irish songs to hard-hitting reels and jigs. Throughout their career, Altan has shown unwavering commitment to bringing the beauty of traditional music to contemporary audiences, particularly that of the Donegal fiddlers and singers. On their upcoming new album, *The Widening Gyre*, Altan explores and celebrates the musical connection between the traditional music of Ireland and the roots and bluegrass music from their across the pond cousin. The chance to experience this thirty year-active band is to experience the living legacy of Irish music.

The seeds of Altan lie in the music and spontaneity of sessions in kitchens and pubs in their hometown of Donegal, where their music was heard in an atmosphere of respect and intimacy. It is here that the band's heart still lies, whether they are performing on TV in Australia or jamming with Ricky Skaggs on the west coast of the United States.

Born of those seeds was the music and personality of band founders, Belfast flute-player, Frankie Kennedy, and Gweedore singer and fiddler, Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh. Whoever heard their unique music in the early eighties, whether at festival or in the small clubs of Dublin and Belfast, was immediately aware of a rare power at work. They seemed to be playing their own repertoire which was, in fact, a combination of old Donegal fiddle music (then little known outside Donegal) and of unusual Northern flute tunes. Frankie and Mairead played with a force and fullness that made it hard to believe that only two people were playing. Their performances combined with Frankie's immense wit and Mairead's down-to-earth charm made an irresistible package. It quickly became clear to them and others that they could go places.

The duo organically grew into a band in the mid-eighties, forged in the bustle and crack of a thousand late-night sessions and festivals throughout Ireland. Their repertoire grew to include music inspired by Irish bands such as the Bothy Band, Planxy and De Danann, and they began to play as "Altan," a name taken from a deep and mysterious lake behind Errigal Mountain in Donegal.

Altan's commitment to good natured fun was second only to their commitment to excellence in all things musical. Thus, the band members gathered were inevitably top-notch. Altan has always been a band of virtuosos. The earliest addition was a bouzouki-player, Ciaran Curran from Co. Fermanagh, a session and festival veteran, nephew of fiddler, Ned Curran, and close friend of fiddler, Ben Lennon, and flute-player, Cathal MacConnell (of the Boys of the Lough). Like all accompanists of the time, Ciaran had invented his own style on the instrument, and his playing lies at the heart of the Altan sound. But like all great accompanists, the perfection of what he does makes it difficult for the casual listener to notice!

With the inclusion of guitarist Mark Kelly in the mid-eighties, Altan truly became a band. Mark, more than the other band members, had a range of experience in styles of music other than Irish. From the start, he showed a gift for tastefully bringing fresh rhythms and chords to the band arrangements. Mark and Ciaran were heard on the '87 album *Altan*, which, though not officially a band album, inaugurates the band's studio sound.

But it was live work in '84-'85 that marked the turning-point for Frankie and Mairead, encouraging them to give up their teaching jobs and go professional. Particularly influential were short trips to the United States in those years when they played concerts in New York, Minnesota, Madison, Portland and Seattle with Derry guitarist, Daithi Sproule, a Minnesota resident and like, Ciaran and Mark, an old friend. Daithi had played a big part in an earlier wave of development in the

music, being one of the very first people to adapt the guitar to old Gaelic songs (many of which he learnt in the Gaeltacht of Rannafast, just a few miles from Mairead's home in Gweedore). These US concerts, played in clubs and sometimes in noisy Irish pubs, where people were expecting a very different sort of music, convinced Frankie and Mairead that no-compromise traditional music played with heart and drive could win over any audience anywhere.

In succeeding years, the band recorded albums for Green Linnet, all of which won accolades and awards and appeared in the Billboard charts -- their collaborators on these albums were of the highest calibre and it shows: Donal Lunny, Brian Masterson and Steve Cooney in particular made great contributions over the years. Another friend played with the band for several years, master fiddler, Paul O'Shaughnessey, a dazzling and fiery player with a deep knowledge of Donegal music. The two-fiddle sound stuck, so when, as Altan toured more and more widely, Paul had to leave due to pressure of work, his place was taken by another great young Donegal fiddler, Ciaran Tourish, a player with a special love for the weaving of spontaneous harmony and counterpoint round the melodies of the other lead players.

Through the years audiences are continually struck by the genuine camaraderie and mutual respect among the members of Altan, and this has been vitally important to the band themselves as well as producing a marked effect on live audiences. So when a final element was added to the sound in the early nineties it was another old friend, though not old in years, since the band had known him and his music since he was a boy. Accordion-player Dermot Byrne, another Donegal man was weaned on the music of an older generation of Donegal fiddlers, the Doherty's, the Byrne's and the Cassidy's. While Dermot's status as a complete virtuoso had been secure for many years before he joined the band, it is also part of his gift that he is able to blend seamlessly with other musicians, so Altan just seemed to get tighter and tighter as a performing unit.

Sadly, in the early nineties Altan was dealt a devastating blow, when band leader and manager, Frankie Kennedy, at the height of his powers as a brilliant and innovative flute-player and just when his and Mairead's musical dreams were being realised, was diagnosed with cancer. Through a long illness, the band, at Frankie's insistence, continued to tour and perform with Frankie's participation whenever possible. No words can describe the effects of his illness and loss on the band, but he continues to be a presence and inspiration in Altan's life and music -- more than anything else, Frankie was a lover of life and perhaps the deepest message of all music is that life goes on -- no matter what.

Altan's international status and success found a very practical recognition when they were signed in 1996 to Virgin Records, the first Irish band of their kind to be signed by a major label. The band gained gold and platinum albums in Ireland and toured larger venues, literally throughout the world, with tours in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Europe as well as regular successful U.S. tours.

In spite of a hectic touring and recording schedule, Altan continue fresh in their vision of bringing the beauty and joy of traditional music to audiences everywhere, and have always promised themselves to continue as long as it's fun -- fortunately, it still is!