

# GALWAY'S HIGH-ACHIEVING MUSICAL INHERITORS

Having had the privilege of attending a BackWest Live gig at the Galway Arts Festival 2018, I can enthusiastically applaud the band for its individual and collective talent writes Anne Marie Kennedy.



Their high-octane energy and their seemingly effortless connection to their audience: exemplary tune players, consummate professionals, fiddle, box, bodhrán, guitar and voices, with Peter Vickers lightning-strike dance, a BackWest concert is a must-see.

Their latest CD *Heritage Hall* showcases ancient music, blending it with their own modern day compositions and traditional tunes in a highly effective, stylised yet organic process.

Maureen Browne has a hugely impressive CV: member of Johnny (Ringo) McDonagh's Arcady, toured and performed with the Alan Kelly gang, Eddie Reader and the Máirtín O'Connor band, the Contempo Quartet, and she has played all over the world with Lord of the Dance. Her brother Brendan, a highly accomplished, unusually dexterous box player was a Riverdance teenager, awarded in musical theatre, a member of Full Steam Ahead, he has made numerous appearances, nationally and internationally on radio and television. Peter Vickers has danced his way around the world with Lord of the Dance and has entertained several Irish Presidents and other heads of States. Fabian Joyce is a well renowned guitar player and singer, currently bolstering his musical scholarship at University of Limerick.

BackWest were awarded a slot at the Danny Kyle Open Stage at Celtic Connections. Chosen from a pool of 280 entrants, they performed in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall and received many laudatory accolades. They were also awarded the American Listener Supported Radio Celtic Music Award for Best New Band 2019. Maureen said they are "Humbled and excited by the ALSR celtic music award. We will be wearing it with pride, thrilled for our ever-growing American fan base, grateful in particular to Maryann McTeague Keifer from Ireland Tonight radio."

As with the previous, sold out album, *The Long Walk*, the band used Bernard O'Connell's The Forge Recording Studio in Galway city to record, mix and master *Heritage Hall*. The album is produced by the Browne siblings with guest musicians Shane McGowan and Carl Hession. Brendan addressed a question about the title origins.

"Heritage, speaks to where we've come from, also to where we're

going. We wanted to take some of the sadness out of 2018 when we lost four of our leading lights, our inspirations, four keystones of the tradition: Liam O'Flynn, Tommy Peoples, Mícheál O'Súilleabháin and Alec Finn. As inheritors of a rich musical legacy we pay them respectful tribute. We have a tune on the album from the 18th century, sitting beside newly made ones, nice to think in a hundred years' time, like these four stalwarts, we will have made some impact, left our own legacy to the generations that follow, to not just be looking back at who the tradition has lost, to also look forward."

The final track on the album, *Theme For Green Lands* is an elegiac, tender salute to the aforementioned four masters. The Browne siblings chose bare-boned fiddle and accordion for the Tommy Peoples remembrance track: *Its Own Wardrobe* is a part of a sentient, timeless quote from the maestro, "if the music is played as it should, then it's got everything. It doesn't need to be dressed in rock clothes or jazz clothes or any other clothes. It's got its own wardrobe." A sentiment that also echoes BackWest's musical ethos and aesthetic.

Maureen is concerned also with the personal. "We are all on a journey, our audiences are too. I'd like to think we take them with us, inspire them, let them be touched by our music and where we came from. We have enjoyed the influence of our great heroes, some we may not be seeing again but they live on in the music, their personalities remembered in stories told, by remembering them at concerts, we are passing on their legacy, their heritage."

All band members are professionals with fulltime careers. Earnings from their previous CD *The Long Walk* were enthusiastically ploughed back into the making of *Heritage Hall*.

"We loved making this album," Maureen says. "We really pushed ourselves, working to a deadline that raised the expectations bar higher, we've great musicality here, our own concept of the music has evolved and we're more experimental, but staying grounded. I know I've expanded my own instrumentation, I've dipped back into classical, pizzicato influences in some of the tunes, our repertoire and style nuances are pushing us to our limits, our minds really energised,

developing alongside the music in an academic way, all fascinating really.”

Like twin relationships, the Browne siblings share a symbiotic energy, something that has been a driving force in the band. They bounce ideas naturally off each other. “Playing together since childhood and all our adult lives we have a unique language, the collaborative work is often emotionally driven. In the studio, Maureen and I take the blank canvas and with our close relationship, work ethic and solid investment in the work, all combine to provide a tray of vivid colours, allowing us to go wild with exuberant decorating.”

*BackWest* live or in their recordings embody the “does what it says on the tin” analogy. They always strive for perfection but the rawness is still there, well-polished rawness: “When someone buys a *BackWest* CD,” Maureen says, “they get it all, they get what happened on stage when they play it at home it’s the same experience. It is not robotic, it is a human performance warts and all, giving it an edge I believe, keeping in touch with the reality that is human effort.”

At their live gigs, the band always pay tribute to their mentors, to the musicians they learned not just the music but stage craft from. Johnny Ringo and Carl Hession get a lot of mention; it was Johnny who was always encouraging Maureen to sing but she demurred until recently. A moment of stage fright at a competition when she was six years old had stayed with her. Brendan says he was surprised that she took up the song mantle from P.J. McDonald and fairly effortlessly.

‘Maureen surprised even me with the singing, could be the sharpest tool in the pencil case now, the well-kept secret, best decision the band has ever made. She certainly knows her way around the songs. We saw her bring silence down over a very loud session in Kinvara last year, great validation of her talent.’

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“After P.J. left I knew we needed a singer,” Maureen chimes in, “and I have always hummed, listening to great women singers all my life: Dolores Keane, Karen Casey, Alison Krauss, Eddie Reader and others. I came out of the singing closet on the radio with Caoimhín O’Sé on Clare FM and he was very supportive so I’m out now, free at last!”

*BackWest* will hit the road for the next few months, an Irish tour punctuated with a trip to Spain, a North American tour in May and again in August. Being native Irish speakers, they perform their hugely successful *as gaeilge* shows in Listowel and for *Siamsaíocht@6* in Dublin. The Galway launch of *Heritage Hall* was on March 29th. *BackWest* tend to sell out on the home ground. As for the ones that have gone before, the heroes celebrated in this album, if they could hear the passionate playing, singing and dancing from *BackWest*, they’d say the tradition is in safe pairs of hands, (and feet!).

**Discover more at [www.backwestmusic.com](http://www.backwestmusic.com)**

