

O'Brien and O Raghallaigh create a 'deadly buzz'

Their long-awaited follow-up to 'Kitty Lie Over'

TO BEE or not to bee: that was the question facing native Dublin musicians Mick O'Brien and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh.

How do they follow up the tremendous buzz created among Irish traditional music cognoscenti by "Kitty Lie Over," their masterpiece of 2003 that finished as the Irish Echo's top traditional album of that year and ranks as one of the best duet albums ever made?

To mix metaphors: How do you bottle lightning twice? Without getting scorched by comparison?

Rest assured, "Deadly Buzz," their eagerly anticipated second album together, reflects all the hallmarks of their duet debut. If this new CD doesn't quite stir the soul and ear as the prior CD did, it may be because the impact of the first one still lingers. Listeners have been prepared by the surprise, adventure, and ensorcellment of "Kitty Lie Over" and expect those same qualities in "Deadly Buzz." So the challenge is even greater for O'Brien and O Raghallaigh, who lives in Ballyferrier, Kerry. They have a very tough act to follow: themselves.

It's amusing now to recount the effort by some Irish trad devotees in 2003 to explain the impact of "Kitty Lie Over" on technical grounds, including O Raghallaigh's tuning of his fiddle several semitones below concert pitch. But eight years later, those explanations have properly faded from memory. There was no trickery, no cross-roads deal with the devil to reach a level of sound unlike any other. A great traditional musician in Ireland recently told me that he puts O'Brien and O Raghallaigh's "Kitty Lie Over" in the same class of classic duets as "Noel Hill and Tony Linnane," Sean Keane and Matt Molloy's "Contentment Is Wealth," Frankie Gavin



An ideal duo: Caoimhin O Raghallaigh and Mick O'Brien.

and Paul Brock's "Omos do Joe Cooley," and Tony MacMahon and Noel Hill's "I gCnoc na Grai." I agree. "Kitty Lie Over" has only grown in stature and aural pleasure since 2003.

So, back to the core question: Have Mick O'Brien and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh risen to the challenge on "Deadly Buzz," a bold title that almost invites skepticism? The answer is an emphatic yes, although "Kitty Lie Over" still edges it out for sheer, soul-stinging brilliance and beauty.

On "Deadly Buzz," O'Brien's B-flat uilleann piping and O Raghallaigh's hardanger fiddling are an unabashed marvel in three medleys: "Ar Phosias Fos / The Surround / We'll Hunt the Wren / The New Way to Miltown," "Gone for His Tea / The Humours of Derrykissane," and "Farewell to Ireland / The Maid in the Cherry Tree / The Mistress of the House." The flow of their music is filled with tanga, subtle intricacies, whether in tempo changes, alternating high-register melody playing, or dynamics.

In his album liner note O'Brien admits to "taking chances undercover, reacting to and interpreting what he [O Raghallaigh] might do with a

phrase in a tune." This intuitive, risky but rewarding approach allows listeners to discover as these two musicians discover: moment to moment, note to note, their imagination alert to sometimes infinitesimal alterations, and their joy in not adhering to a strict pattern of joint playing. O'Brien and O Raghallaigh let their music lead them rather than vice versa. The journey means more than the destination, yet each delivers emotional power.

Every one of the dozen tracks on "Deadly Buzz" is a notable achievement. Especially remarkable are "Denis Murphy's Quirky Fling / Jimmy Doyle's Polka / Port Mhairtín Sheamus," where O'Brien's F flute and O Raghallaigh's hardanger fiddle playing virtually dance together; "The Lass of Carracastle / The Morning Dew / Lad O'Beirne's Geese in the Bog," where O'Brien's B-flat piping and O Raghallaigh's non-hardanger fiddling are a tour de force forming an irresistible undertow; and "A Curious Denis Murphy Jig / The Belles of Liscarroll," where B-flat pipes and non-hardanger fiddle seem to move to an extra, internal rhythm all their own.

Two tracks are B-flat whistle duets: "Dessie O'Connor's Paidín O Raifeartaigh / Cuilinn Uí Chaoimh / Kitty Come Down to Limerick" and "The Dublin Lads / The Taproom / The Liffey Banks." The impression they create is akin to that produced by Lunasa's Kevin Crawford, Sean Smyth, and Cillian Vallely during their three-whistle playing of Pierre Bensusan's "The Last Pint" in concert.

"Aoibhinn Cronan / The Hopstores / Lily of the Valley," all compositions of Cork's Peadar Ó Riada, start off in a different, haunting mood, established by O'Brien's delicate drone on the pipes as O Raghallaigh plays the melody line on non-hardanger fiddle. That is followed by the pipes assuming the melody line and then both instruments joining for the last two uptempo tunes. It is the longest track on the CD and documents with rich detail just how in sync these two musicians are.

Like Kerry button accordionist Brendan Begley, Mick O'Brien has found a path into what might be described as Caoimhin O Raghallaigh's exploratory "head music" now reinvigorating Irish traditional music without compromise,

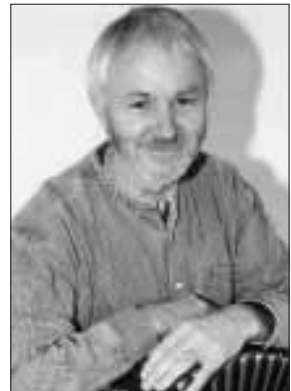
or knee-jerk hybridization. O Raghallaigh, in turn, has found an ideal partner in O'Brien, whose virtuosity on the uilleann pipes received strong critical acclaim on his exceptional solo album in 1996, "May Morning Dew." Mick O'Brien is a piper's piper who deserves far more recognition than he's received to date. His playing on "Deadly Buzz" should serve as a sizable step toward gaining it.

Taken together, "Kitty Lie Over" and "Deadly Buzz" are monumental, raising the bar for what an Irish traditional duet could be. Let the buzz on "Deadly Buzz" wing far and wide. As it does, I hope the duo of Mick O'Brien and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh will give some serious thought to coming to the U.S. for a tour, festival, or summer school. They are overdue here. In the meantime, alight on "Deadly Buzz," their magnificent follow-up CD to "Kitty Lie Over."

For more information about the album (ImdN CD BR42), visit www.irishmusic.net. To purchase the recording in the U.S., contact Ossian USA, 118 Beck Rd., Loudon, NH 03307, 603-783-4383, www.ossianusa.com, info@ossianusa.com.

New tunebook

A STRONG case can be made for Galway's Mairtín O'Connor as the most accomplished button accordionist in Ireland today. He has just published his first tunebook, "Inside the Box / Outside the Box," filled with 60 of his own compositions. They include "Shop Street," a hornpipe he wrote in admiration for the only Irish button accordionist superior to him in talent, Joe Derrane. In the U.S., visit Elderly Instruments at www.elderly.com to acquire the book. I'll be reviewing it in a future "Ceol" column.



Mairtín O'Connor has published a book of his own tunes.

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