

Magical and harmonious Solas head to “Shamrock City”

By Paul Keating

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For those of us who toil in the vineyards of traditional Irish music, it looks like another year of brilliant creativity and collaboration that keeps that genre very much a living tradition.

This past weekend the number of options and great music on offer was a logistical challenge met head on because there were opportunities to see and hear new music and make acquaintances with new musicians and old friends.

It all began with the drive out west in New Jersey to a wonderful theatre in Blairstown that will be marking its 100th anniversary this year and has become a welcome performance space for a wide assortment of well-known and new talent.

This was my third foray there to see Irish acts (Lunasa and Full Set last year) and on Friday I saw Solas, the super group formulated in Irish America which was among those trail-blazing trad bands who sought to make a living playing music in the 1990s.

Seamus Egan and Winnie Horan were founding members of the band. They remain the guiding directors enduring cast changes over the years, but still managing to record and tour and remain in the top tier of touring choices for gigs around the world.

Since accordion player Mick McAuley and guitar/piano accompanist Eamonn McElholm have been with the group for more than 11 years, there is a real stability and defined sound emanating from the busy band which has adapted to a number of different singers over the years, with Karen Casey, Deirdre Scanlan, Mairead Phelan featured on past recordings.

A couple of years ago Niamh Varian Barry from Cork joined the ensemble. Her distinctive voice, delivery and energy have solidified this current version of Solas once again.

Last year they under took a very ambitious and personally meaningful project to uncover more about the Irish American immigrant experience in Butte, Montana, the one-time very prosperous copper mining town in Big Sky country.

The demand and opportunity for much needed work toiling in the minefields was a lure for hard-pressed Irish Immigrants around the turn of the 20th Century in the early 1900s.

One of Egan’s distant relations, Michael Conway, was encouraged to make his way straight to Montana “without stopping in America” to find work in the Boomtown Butte.

Conway’s story and many other gripping and historically intriguing details of life in that part of the West as America was still evolving into the powerhouse of the 20th century is captured in the project known as “Shamrock City” produced by Solas.

Last year they launched a crowd sourcing effort on Kickstarter that yielded \$30,000 to allow them to

gather research in Montana that would be used for their new CD and follow up DVD, and as part of their touring material for this year as a visual backdrop to their performances.

The CD, which is their first without benefit of a record label (are there really benefits anymore to record labels?) is entitled Shamrock City, with a street launch early in February, but it was previewed at the first show of the year last Friday night in Blirstown.

Thanks to the technical assistance of the Blirstown theater owner Mark Clifford, where movies are still shown on occasion, the slide presentation produced by the multi-talented Egan depicted a mother lode of appropriate photos to illustrate a rich mine of original material that makes this album one to be savored and explored for its colorful window on a part of Irish American history that isn't generally well-known, at least here in the East.

Since the scope of the project is very much evolving as it is broken out more in live performances and as more production work beyond the CD is carried out concurrently, we'll have more to say about it down the road.

But what was very evident last Friday night was that Egan and his Solas mates have found a productive vein in the Shamrock City concept to mine at this stage of their professional careers.

Based on the performance this could be a landmark recording, and in some aspects it might very well be the best one they have ever done, which is saying something given the "supernova" status of their early years and first three recordings when John Williams, John Doyle and Casey were part of the original band.

There is something very magical and harmonious about the way this band works nowadays that only enhances the thoughtful and sophisticated melodies and rhythms their music provides for their audiences.

<http://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/others/magical-and-harmonious-solas-head-to-shamrock-city-video-187577111-238167021.html#ixzz2zdKUi0wP>